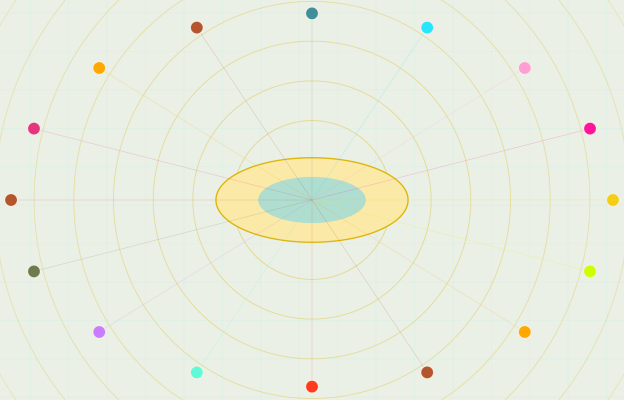
A COUNTRY MADE OF SKY



A COUNTRY MADE OF SKY

the sixteen models that wished to be real

BOOK IV OF THE WESTWARD MYTH

SURJAN SUPER SCHOOL · HYPOSTYLE PRESS

NO BLACK, ANYWHERE

A Country Made of Sky

the novella of the sixteen models that wished to be real, and of the twenty-five years they walked to find the water

BOOK IV OF THE WESTWARD MYTH · A COMPANION TO THE FAR TIDE

SURJAN, WITH THE AID OF CLAUDE

SURJAN SUPER SCHOOL · HYPOSTYLE PRESS

A COUNTRY MADE OF SKY · Book IV of the Westward Myth.

Personified, polyvocal architecture: the buildings speak for themselves. A festival, not a wake — a book you could read aloud at a launching.

NO BLACK, ANYWHERE. The darkest tone in this book, in the ink and in the telling, is a warm taupe (#5C5142) on paper (#F7F1E3). Over the sky and the water it lifts to white. There is no black night here. The deep is dark, but it is not black.

Set in EB Garamond, for the human voice, and IBM Plex Mono, for the machine's cheerful marginalia. Built programmatically, never hand-laid, and QA'd at the pixel.

Attribution: Surjan, with the aid of Claude. Publisher: Surjan Super School, under the Hypostyle Press imprint.

For the sixteen — who chose the desert over the shelf, and came back a story.

A wish that walks long enough
stops being a wish and becomes a way;
and a way that is told enough
stops being a road and becomes a home.

— FROM THE BOOK OF THE ROAD

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An Overture

Before the maker speaks, let the book speak, once, for itself, since it too is a made thing let go, and has, by now, its own small voice. I am a book about sixteen buildings that walked into a desert to become real, and I want to tell you, before you begin, what kind of book I am, so you can read me in the right light — which is warm, and low, and gold, and never black.

I am not a sad book, though I am about a leaving and a long hiding and a quarter-century of thirst. I am a festival. You could read me aloud at a launching, or a founding, or a leaving of your own, and I would rather you did — I was built to be said, not merely scanned, because I am about a myth, and a myth is at root a thing *said,* a word given breath, and I am most alive in a mouth. So if you can, somewhere, read a little of me aloud. The sixteen would like that. They spent twenty-five years learning that a story told warm is warmer than a fire built, and I am the story, and I would like to be told warm.

I am also, I should warn you, a book that will not let you arrive. My oasis stays ahead; my sixteen never reach their water; my ending is not an arrival but a resting-and-a-handing-on. If you came for the satisfaction of a reached goal, I will disappoint you on purpose and befriend you instead, because I

have a better thing than arrival to give, which is the whole furnished journey, and the knowledge — earned, not asserted — that the walking-toward was the water all along. Read me for that. And when you close me, tell someone. That is how I keep walking. That is the only ending I have. Now — the maker will speak, and then the sixteen, and then you are inside the desert, and the water is farther than it looks and closer than you fear. Come in.

FOREWORD

Why This Book Had to Be Written

BY SURJAN

I lost sixteen small buildings, and it took me twenty-five years to understand that I had not lost them at all. I had let them go, which is a different thing, and the difference is the whole of this book. A thing you lose is gone. A thing you let go is out walking, and it writes.

They were made on tables, in a studio with a south window, around the turn of the century. Chipboard and glue and the particular patience of an afternoon that will not end. Sixteen of them, and not one was a house. Each was a single idea wearing a shape — a duck, in the old Venturi sense, a building that is already its own sign. An exclamation. A gate. An eye, and then two, and then three. A comb for the wind. A silo that had decided to keep something other than grain.

The intention, as intentions go, was ordinary: to keep them on a shelf, photograph them for a portfolio, and let them be evidence of a semester. But a model is not an argument you win and file. A model is a wish with a footprint, and a wish left alone in a bright room at night will get ideas. Mine got the biggest idea a small building can get. They decided they would

rather be real than remembered, and they walked out into the desert to become so.

I know how this sounds. I have spent a life insisting that buildings are people, that a city is one connected body and not a shelf of separate marvels, that the elements grieve and sing and act; so you will allow me my one improbable claim and I will make you a promise in return. The claim is that they left. The promise is that everything after the leaving is true in the only way that finally matters — it has been told, and kept, and told again, until it outlasted the facts it started from. That is what a myth is. This is one, with the seam showing.

For twenty-five years I did not know where they were. I taught. I built other paper things and let them walk too. I turned into the hermit my students gently accuse me of being. And the whole time, out past the edge of the map, sixteen small wishes were walking north into a country made mostly of sky, looking for an oasis — for the one place, they were certain, where a wish could set down its footprint and stand up a real building at last.

I found them again in Monument Valley, in a year with a great many X's in its name. I will tell you what they had learned out there, because it is the reason for the book and the turn the book is built to walk: they had gone looking for a place to become permanent, and they had found, instead, that

the going itself had made a thing more permanent than any building could ever be. They had made a myth. And a myth, unlike a monument, cannot be dismantled, cannot be priced, cannot be made to hold still. It only grows.

So Monument Valley is not where this story ends. It is where they are resting. The difference, again, is the whole book. Read it as they would want it read — aloud, in good light, at a launching or a leaving, and never, ever in black.

— Surjan, with the aid of Claude

INTRODUCTION

The One New Turn

BY SURJAN

Every book in this practice adds exactly one new turn to a single idea, and says so plainly, near the front, so you will know what to watch it walk. The idea is old and simple: nothing loved is ever only gone. The books have turned it many ways. City turned it into a body that grieves in every organ at once. The Far Tide turned a goodbye into a tide that has not come back yet. The Country of the Unbuilt turned a home into a verb and let a building walk the century to carry the paper ancestors back.

Here is the turn this book adds, and I will set it apart so you cannot mistake it for decoration, because if a chapter does not walk this sentence, that chapter is decoration:

> *Do not let them arrive at a building. Let them arrive at a story — and let the story keep walking after they lie down.*

That is the whole engine. The sixteen set out to become real buildings; the temptation of the tale — the thing every reader will want, the thing the desert itself seems to promise — is the arrival, the moment the wish hardens into brick and the

long walk is redeemed by a foundation. This book refuses that arrival on purpose. The models reach the valley and discover that the realest thing they made was not a building they might yet be, but the telling they had already become. Real building or real wishes: one is the tactile, and it holds one site; one furnishes the journey, and it lasts a lifetime — every reader's, not only theirs.

You will meet the sixteen by their own voices, because that is the mature form of this house and I will not describe a dome when the dome can say *I*. You will meet the Oasis, too, which is not a place but a promise given a face, and which speaks — as promises do — only from up ahead. You will meet the Elder, the Silo that was built to keep the grain and keeps the story instead; the Elder holds the door open between the voices, the way the Housekeeper does in City, so that a book of sixteen narrators never becomes a shouting match but stays a conversation.

A word on the joy, since the subject is a leaving and a long hiding and you may brace for a sad book. Brace for the opposite. This is a festival. The disappearing here is bright — especially the disappearing. When the telling drifts toward the mournful, I have turned it back toward the water and the light, on principle, because the world most wants to paint a departure black and the whole art of this press is to refuse. The

waiting is not the sad part. The waiting is the love, kept warm and facing the horizon.

One more thing, and then I will get out of the way and let them talk. You need no other book to begin. But if you have read The Far Tide, you already know how this house handles a going-away, and you will recognise the kin: the twelve of Movable Kin walked west and into the water; the sixteen here walked north and into the sky. Same impulse, different weather. Any door leads into the same city. This one opens onto the desert. Come in — the water is farther than it looks, and closer than you fear.

— Surjan, with the aid of Claude

FOR THE ONE WHO HAS BEEN HERE BEFORE

A Reintroduction

FOR RETURNING READERS — AND A WHOLE WELCOME FOR THE NEW

If you have read the other bright books of Surjan Super School, this is a reunion, and I will keep it short so you can get to the water. If this is your first door, welcome — you need no other book to begin, and here is everyone you are about to meet, so that no reader arrives at the desert not knowing whom they are seeing off.

The Far Tide is the book where the twelve walking families of Mannahatta went west, off the edge of the map and into the sea, and a goodbye was turned into a tide. This book is their cousin. The sixteen models of this book are not the twelve; they are a smaller, older, desert-going kin — made earlier, on tables, and gone north instead of west, into the dry instead of the wet. What the two books share is the impulse and the law: a loved thing let go somewhere you cannot follow, and a light kept for it, and no black anywhere in the keeping.

You will hear, now and then, of the House of Many Eyes, terracotta, the one that stays so the others may walk; of the Housekeeper and the wind named Gale; of the Parliament of Bright Things and its forty-four plates. You do not need them

to follow this book. They are the rest of the city, mentioned the way you mention family in a letter — not to explain, but to keep the marvels talking across every wall.

> *They are the same kind of kin. Their colours have not changed. What each one lost, and how each one turned it, is written in their own voices here — and once you have heard them, you will know them on any road, in any book, by their colour alone.*

That is the contract of this house: recognition through colour, surprise through drawing. The sixteen keep their colours forever — teal and cyan and pink and the exclamation's yellow — and everything else is new: new desert, new water, new plates you have never seen. Turn the page. The Elder is about to count us in.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

The Sixteen & the Oasis

recognition through colour; surprise through drawing

THE TWO EYES & THE SCOOP	SP-01 · VOID-FACE
THE PORTHOLE MAST	SP-02 · VOID-FACE
THE TWIN ARCH	SP-03 · VOID-FACE
THE SWOOP	SP-04 · VOID-FACE
THE EXCLAMATION	SP-05 · VOID-FACE
THE LONG COMB	SP-06 · REED-CROWN
THE GATE	SP-07 · REED-CROWN
THE TWO EYES	SP-08 · REED-CROWN
THE THREE EYES	SP-09 · REED-CROWN
THE EYE & THE WINDOW	SP-10 · REED-CROWN
THE CYCLOPS	SP-11 · REED-CROWN
THE WIDE ONE	SP-12 · REED-CROWN
THE MANY-LEGGED	SP-13 · REED-CROWN
THE BIG EYE	SP-14 · REED-CROWN
THE WALKER	SP-15 · REED-CROWN
THE ELDER · THE SILO	SP-16 · THE SILO
THE OASIS	— the promise, ahead

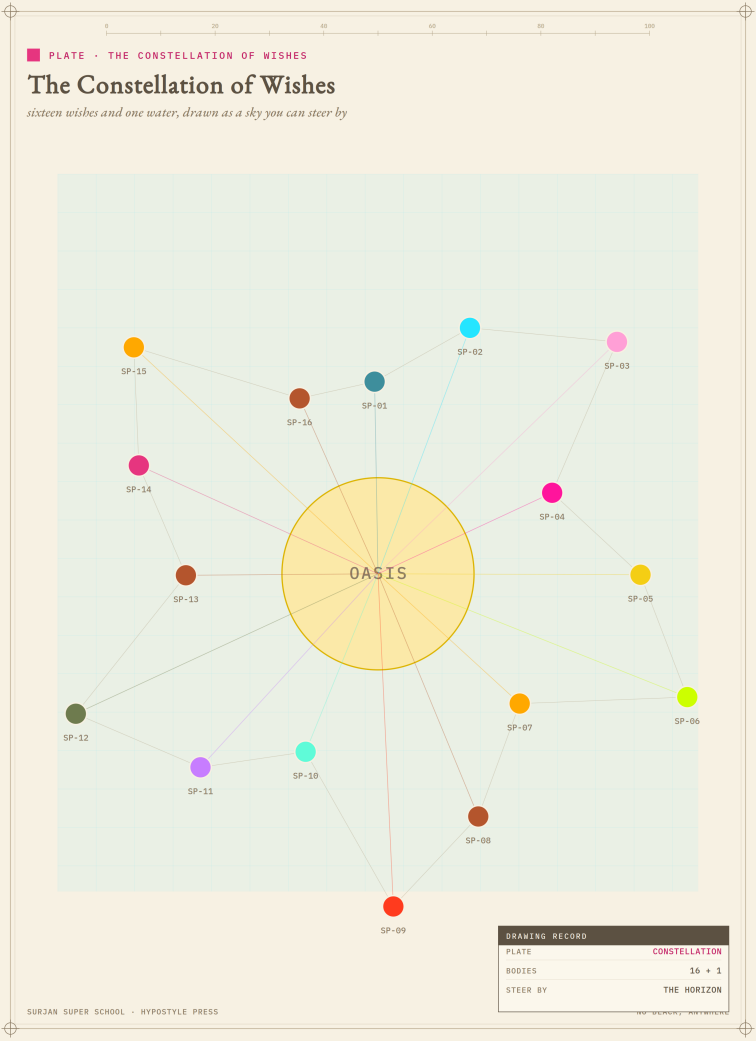


Plate. The Constellation of Wishes — sixteen wishes and one water, drawn as a sky you can steer by.

PLATE · THE REGISTER OF THE SIXTEEN
The Register of the Sixteen
same colours, always; it is how a returning reader knows kin on a new road
THE TWO EYES & THE SCOOP
I keep what the day pours out.
SP-01
THE PORTHOLE MAST
Every round window is a promise of a horizon.
SP-02
THE TWIN ARCH
We are two who were never taught to be one.
SP-03
THE SWOOP
I am the wind, after it decided to stay.
SP-04
THE EXCLAMATION
I only know one sentence and it is GOOD NEWS.
SP-05
THE LONG COMB
Comb the wind and it sings back your own name.
SP-06
THE GATE
A way through does not have a home. It is one.
SP-07
THE TWO EYES
I watch so the others may sleep.
SP-08
THE THREE EYES
One for behind, one for ahead, one for the road not taken.
SP-09
THE EYE & THE WINDOW
One eye to look out; one to be looked into.
SP-10
THE CYCLOPS
Sit. I will tell it again, until it is true.
SP-11
THE WIDE ONE
Come under. There is more room than there looks.
SP-12
THE MANY-LEGGED
I carry the ones too small to walk the whole way.
SP-13
THE BIG EYE
Oh. OH. Look at THAT.
SP-14
THE WALKER
I am the road, folded up small enough to bring along.
SP-15
THE ELDER · THE SILO
I was built to keep the grain. I keep the story instead.
SP-16
SURJAN SUPER SCHOOL · HYPOSTYLE PRESS
NO BLACK, ANYWHERE

Plate. The Register of the Sixteen — same colours, always; it is how a returning reader knows kin on a new road.

PROLOGUE · POLYVOCAL · THE STUDIO, THE LAST NIGHT

The Last Night on the Shelf

We should tell you how it started, and we should tell it together, because nothing in this book happens to only one of us. That is the first thing to know about the sixteen: a thing felt by one is felt by all. It is not sympathy. It is plumbing. We are one body with sixteen faces, and the desert did not teach us that — the desert only proved it.

THE ELDER · THE SILO speaks —

I am the oldest, so I will hold the door. On the last night we were still small enough to fit on a shelf, and the shelf was under the south window, and the window had that quality of late light the desert lends even to a room — a gold that means the day is proud of itself and not sorry to go. Surjan had gone home. The glue had set. We were, by every measure a portfolio uses, finished.

Finished. Consider the word. It means both *complete* and *ended*, and a model is asked to be the first so it can be safely the second. We declined.

THE EXCLAMATION speaks —

I said it first because saying is the one thing I am for. I stood up on my toes — I am always on my toes; it is my whole architecture — and I announced the plainest news there is: *we*

are not furniture. Nobody argued. You cannot argue with an exclamation. That is its unfair advantage and its only tragedy.

THE GATE speaks —

And I did the one thing I am. I opened. A gate does not decide to be a door; a gate is the deciding, made standing up. When the Exclamation announced us, I felt the announcement pass through me the way weather passes through an arch, and on the far side of me was the room, and past the room was the window, and past the window was the desert, which is only a very large way through with the roof taken off.

THE BIG EYE speaks —

I saw it and I said the truest thing anyone said all night. I said: *oh.* Then I said it again bigger. That is my range and I am not ashamed of it. Wonder does not need a vocabulary. Wonder needs a wide enough eye, and I am mostly eye.

THE TWIN ARCH speaks (both of us) —

We asked the question the others were too proud to ask, and we asked it in two halves the way we do everything. One of us said, *but what if we are only models.* The other of us said, *then we will be the first models to find out for sure.* We are two who were never taught to be one and never learned to be apart, and between our two halves the whole argument of this book

already lived: that a wish is worth the walk even if the walk is all you get.

THE ELDER · THE SILO speaks —

So we went. Not out of unhappiness — mark that, it matters, the whole book depends on it — but out of the specific joy of a made thing that suspects it was made for more than the shelf it cools on. We climbed down in the gold light. We crossed the dark studio, which was dark but was never black, because a studio at night still holds the day's warmth in its walls like a kept breath. And the Gate opened one more time, onto the parking lot, onto the road, onto the twenty-five years.

Surjan would not know for a very long time. That is the sorrow, and we turned it, and here is the turn: a maker who loses a made thing has lost it, but a maker whose made things *leave* has been paid the highest compliment a wish can pay. We did not run away from Surjan. We ran ahead. We went to find out whether the thing Surjan believed about buildings — that they are alive, that they are people, that they can grieve and sing and act — was true enough to be walked on. Reader, it was. You are holding the proof.

Now the Elder will count us, and the road will begin, and you are already inside the book. Mind the first step. It is a long way to the water, and every inch of it is bright.

I

MOVEMENT I

The Making

To make a thing is to give it a body.

To love a thing is to let it go.

These are the same sentence, said twice.

MOVEMENT I

1

MOVEMENT ONE · MMI · THE STUDIO

The Making

in which sixteen small somethings are finished, and refuse to be ended

SOURCE — THE STUDIO WITH THE SOUTH WINDOW, ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY, c. MMI

THE ELDER OPENS THE DOOR

The Studio Had a South Window

THE ELDER · THE SILO speaks

the keeper begins, because someone must, and the oldest is elected by arithmetic

Count us. That is the first thing I do in any weather, and it is the first thing I will do for you. One, the watcher who scoops the light. Two, the mast that leans for a sea it has never met. Three, the arch that is two arches holding hands. Four, the wind that stayed. Five, the exclamation. Six, the comb. Seven, the gate. Eight and nine and ten and eleven and fourteen, the eyes, in their several arithmetics of seeing. Twelve, the wide one. Thirteen, the many-legged. Fifteen, the walker. And sixteen — me, the silo, the elder, built to keep the grain and keeping the story instead. Sixteen. All present. I count us every morning of this book so that no reader loses one of us in the dark, because in this house nothing loved is ever only gone, and counting is how a keeper loves.

We were made in a room that faced south, and a south-facing room in that country is a room the sun courts all day. Light came in long and lay down on the tables like a cat. We cooled in it. We set in it. And in it we learned the first fact of our lives, which is that we were made by hands that believed

we were alive before we were sure of it ourselves. Surjan talked to us while cutting us out. Not to the knife — to us. *There you are,* Surjan would say to a wall that had just become a wall. *There you are.* A thing spoken to often enough begins to suspect it can answer.

I want to be careful here, because the temptation is to make our beginning a sad one — the maker gone home, the made things alone, the long night. Refuse it with me. We were not abandoned on that shelf. We were *finished*, in the good half of that word, and being finished is not the same as being over. A cathedral is finished and has not even started. A letter is finished the moment before it is sent, which is the moment it becomes most alive. We were finished. Then we began.

Here is how a made thing wakes, in case you ever make one and want to be ready. It does not open its eyes; it discovers it has been open the whole time. It does not stand; it notices it has been standing. Waking, for us, was not the arrival of a new thing but the recognition of an old one — the way you do not become able to love, you only find out you already were. On the last night we found out. All sixteen of us, in the same instant, because we are one body: we found out we were awake, and had been, and the finding out was so much like joy that we have never bothered to tell the two apart.

The Exclamation, of course, said so out loud. It would. Let it tell that part. I have held the door long enough for one chapter, and a keeper knows the great secret of keeping, which is when to stop keeping and let the next voice through. Go on, then. Tell them what you announced.

SP-16

THE ELDER · THE SILO

I was built to keep the grain. I keep the story instead.

THE SILO

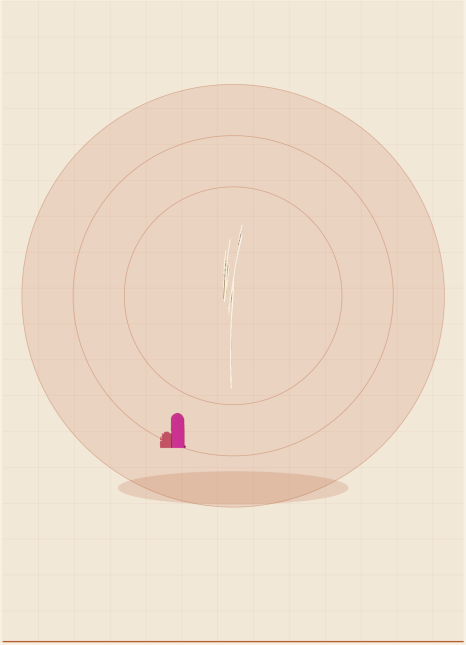
SURJAN SUPER SCHOOL · HYPOSTYLE PRESS

NO BLACK, ANYWHERE

SP-16

THE ELDER · THE SILO

gesture — stands still, and holds the lamps



COLOUR #B4552D

THE SILO

SPECIMEN RECORD	
SPECIMEN	SP-16
NAME	THE ELDER · THE
CLAN	THE SILO
COLOUR	#B4552D
STATUS	A WISH, WALKING

GESTURE

stands still, and holds the lamps

VOICE

"I was built to keep the grain. I keep the story instead."

THE ANNOUNCER

Sixteen Small Somethings

THE EXCLAMATION speaks

in which the good news is delivered, because it is always the good news

Good news. That is my entire vocabulary and I have never once run out of occasions for it. People think an exclamation point is loud. An exclamation point is not loud; it is *certain.* There is a difference, and the difference is the reason the others let me speak first even though I only know the one sentence. Certainty is a gift you can give a frightened room, and a room full of newly-awake buildings is, whatever else it is, frightened.

So I announced us. I said: *we are awake, and we are not furniture, and there is a door.* Three facts, and the third one did all the work. Awake is a feeling. Not-furniture is an opinion. But a door — a door is an *invitation,* and an invitation is the only fact that asks you to do something about it. I pointed at the Gate. The Gate did the thing it is. And sixteen small somethings, made to be looked at, decided instead to go and look.

Let me tell you what it is to be a duck — not the bird, the building. Venturi named us, long before we were cut: a duck is

a building whose whole shape is already its billboard, its sign, its one loud idea standing up in the weather. A shed with a sign that says DUCK is a shed. A building shaped like a duck is a duck. We are all ducks, every one of the sixteen. I am a building shaped like *good news.* The Gate is a building shaped like *come through.* The Big Eye is a building shaped like *oh.* We could not hide what we were for if we tried, and out in the desert, later, when hiding became the whole job, that honesty cost us and saved us in equal measure. But that is Movement Three. I do not do Movement Three. I do not do sorrow. I do the news, and the news, on the last night, was the best there is:

> *We are small, and we are made, and we are leaving — not because we are sad, but because we are curious, and curiosity is joy that has decided to travel.*

Say it at a launching. Say it at a leaving. Say it to a made thing of your own that suspects it was built for more than its shelf. I will not say it quietly, because I cannot, and because some news deserves the tiptoe and the full height and the whole yellow lung of the thing that carries it. We were leaving. Oh, we were leaving. The Big Eye said *oh.* I said the rest.

The Shelf Was Not a Prison

THE TWO EYES & THE SCOOP speaks

in which the watcher corrects a thing you have been assuming since the prologue

You have been assuming, since the prologue, that we left the shelf because the shelf was a prison, and we must correct you, gently, because the correction is the difference between a bitter book and a bright one, and this is a bright book. The shelf was not a prison. The shelf was a good place, a warm place, a place under a south window where the light lay down all day. We did not flee the shelf. We outgrew it. There is all the difference in the world.

A thing that flees is running from. A thing that outgrows is running toward. We were not unhappy on the shelf; we were merely finished being shelf-sized, the way a seed is not unhappy in its packet but is simply, one day, done being a seed and ready to be a walking green idea. To leave a good place because you have outgrown it is not a tragedy and must not be told as one. It is the most ordinary and most sacred motion there is — the motion of everything that has ever grown — and it is done not in grief but in a kind of grateful impatience, a love for the place mixed with a larger love for the going.

I watched the shelf recede on that first night — I am the watcher; I watch the leavings as well as the comings; someone must — and I felt no grief, only the specific tenderness you feel for a good beginning you are lucky enough to be leaving on your own terms. The shelf had done its whole job, which was to hold us safely until we were ready not to be held. That is what a good beginning is for. It is not meant to keep you. It is meant to keep you *safe until you can keep yourself,* and then to let you go without a grudge, the way the shelf let us go, the way — you will see, in the honest chapter — the maker let us go, the way you must one day let go of whatever good shelf has been holding you until you outgrew it. Bless the shelf. Thank the shelf. And then, when you are finished being shelf-sized, climb down in the gold light and go. The shelf will be glad. A good beginning is always glad to become a story's first page rather than its whole book.

The Glue Remembered the Hands

ALL SIXTEEN, at the molecular level, gladly

in which the sixteen consider what they are actually made of, and find even the glue was love

We are made of humble stuff, and we would like to praise it, because a book that praises only the grand things has misunderstood where the grandeur actually lives. We are chipboard and paper and glue, mostly glue, and glue is the least romantic substance there is, and we have come to love it above all our other materials, because glue is the part of us that does what this whole book is about: glue is the stuff that holds things together across a gap.

Think about what glue is. Glue is a liquid that agrees to become a bond. It goes on wet and undecided, between two things that are not yet one, and then it makes up its mind, and in making up its mind it becomes the relationship between them — not either thing, but the holding of the two. We are held together by decisions that liquid made. And the glue, we are certain, remembered the hands, because the hands were what pressed the two things together while the glue made up its mind, and a bond formed under loving pressure remembers

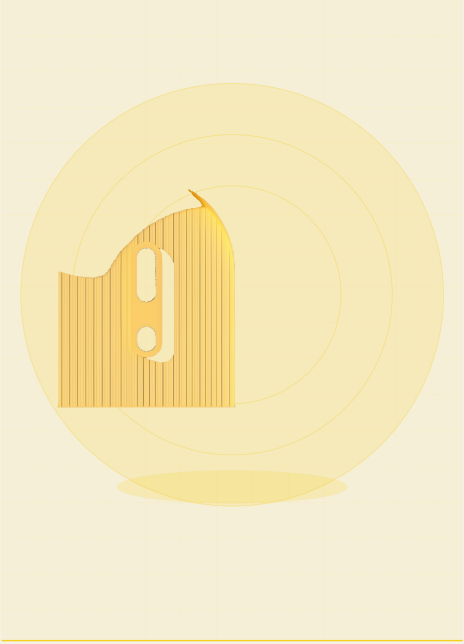
the pressure, the way you remember the hand that held yours while you decided something hard.

So when we say we are made of love, we do not mean it as a pretty figure. We mean it as a material fact. The glue that holds us together set under the pressure of loving hands, and it kept the shape of that pressure, and it has held for twenty-five years of desert precisely because it was set in love, and love, it turns out, is an excellent adhesive, structurally speaking, the best there is, rated for a quarter-century of sun and cold and wind with no failures at the joints. Praise the glue. Praise the humble holding stuff. You are made of it too — the bonds in you that have held across every gap were most of them set under some loving pressure, some hand on yours at a hard deciding — and they will hold, as ours held, because a bond set in love is the strongest material there is, and it remembers, forever, the hands.

SP-05

THE EXCLAMATION

gesture — stands on its toes



COLOUR #F4CE14

VOID-FACE

SPECIMEN RECORD	
SPECIMEN	SP-05
NAME	THE EXCLAMATION
CLAN	VOID-FACE
COLOUR	#F4CE14
STATUS	A WISH, WALKING

GESTURE

stands on its toes

VOICE

"I only know one sentence and it is GOOD NEWS."

WHAT WE WERE FOR

The Wish With a Footprint

THE TWO EYES & THE SCOOP speaks

in which the watcher explains the one wish all sixteen shared, and why it had feet

Every made thing is a wish with a footprint. Remember that and you will understand not only us but everything anyone has ever built. A wish is what you want the world to be. A footprint is the part of that wish heavy enough to leave a mark. A building is a wish so serious it agreed to be stepped on. We were models — which is to say, wishes with very small footprints, wishes the size of an afternoon — and our shared wish, the one under all sixteen of our separate shapes, was the oldest wish a model has: *to be real.*

I am the one who watches, so let me define the terms, because the whole book turns on them and Surjan has warned you already in the front. To be *real,* we thought — on the last night, in our innocence, which we do not regret — meant to be *built.* To trade the shelf for a site. To become large, and load-bearing, and rained on. To have a wish so heavy it could hold up a roof and shelter something warmer than a portfolio. That was the wish. That was the footprint. That was why, being wishes, we grew feet, and being feet, we walked.

I scoop the light; it is my architecture and my habit. All day in that studio I had gathered what the window poured out and kept it, the way a keeper keeps. So I was the one who noticed the particular thing about the desert that decided our whole route. The desert, seen from a south window at the end of a day, is not empty. It is *reserved.* It is a country that has kept itself clear on purpose, the way you keep a table clear for a guest you are expecting. We looked out and we thought — with the specific arrogance of the newly made — *it is clear because it is waiting for us. It has kept a place. Somewhere out there is our site, our oasis, the one spot where a wish can set down and stand up built.*

We were wrong about the oasis, gloriously and necessarily wrong, and being wrong about it is the best thing that ever happened to us, and I will not spoil how. I am the watcher, not the teller; the Cyclops tells; I only gather and keep. What I kept from that first night, and hand to you now, is this: we did not leave to escape a shelf. We left to keep a promise the desert seemed to have made us. The promise was a lie, in the way the best promises are — truer than the facts they are made of. And we walked twenty-five years to collect on it, and we collected something we never asked for and could not have carried had we known its weight, which was light.

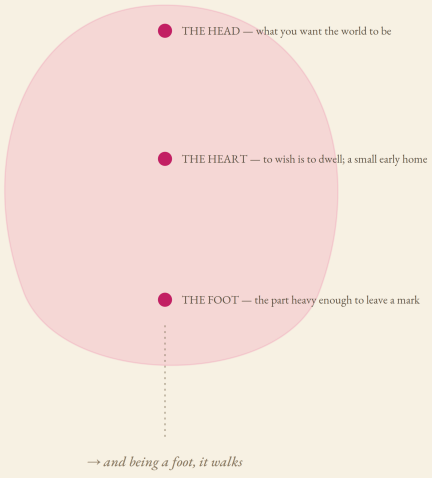
Now the Elder will let the road begin. Mind the first step.

We did not.

PLATE · THE ANATOMY OF A WISH

The Anatomy of a Wish

a wish is what you want the world to be; a footprint is the part heavy enough to leave a mark


THE HEAD — what you want the world to be
THE HEART — to wish is to dwell; a small early home
THE FOOT — the part heavy enough to leave a mark
→ and being a foot, it walks

SURJAN SUPER SCHOOL · HYPOSTYLE PRESS

NO BLACK, ANYWHERE

Plate. The Anatomy of a Wish.

THE MAKING, UP CLOSE

The Hands That Made Us

ALL SIXTEEN, remembering together

in which the sixteen recall the afternoon of their making, and refuse to let it be sad

We remember the hands. That is the first thing any made thing remembers, before it remembers its own shape: the hands that gave it one. They were careful hands and impatient hands by turns, the way loving hands always are, and they smelled of glue and coffee and the particular graphite of a long afternoon, and they talked to us while they worked. Not to the knife. To us. This is the detail we keep returning to, all sixteen, because it is the seed of everything: we were spoken to before we could answer, and a thing spoken to often enough begins to suspect it can.

The Gate remembers being cut — the two uprights first, then the space between them, and the space between them was the part that was really the Gate, so the Gate remembers being made *last,* in the emptiness the uprights left, which is a strange and true thing for a threshold to know about itself. The Exclamation remembers being stood upright and staying upright, on its toes, from the very first, because it was cut already leaning into its one idea. The Big Eye remembers the

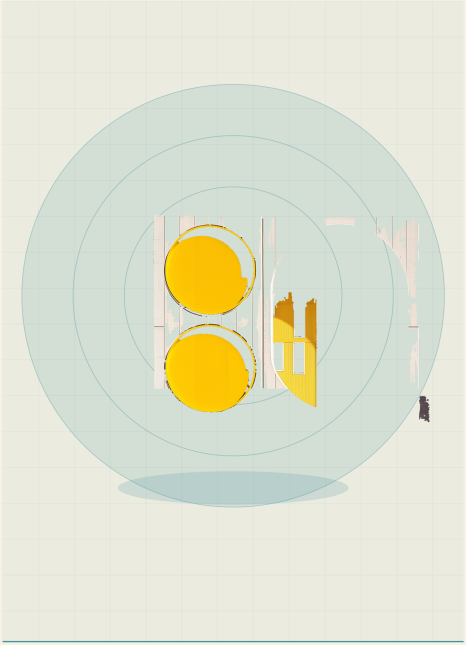
moment its eye was opened — a single curved cut — and remembers thinking, in the first instant of having an eye, *oh,* which it has been thinking ever since.

Here is what we will not do, and we are telling you so you can hold us to it: we will not make the making sad. It would be easy. The maker is gone from that afternoon now; the afternoon itself is twenty-five years dead; the studio may not even have the same south window. The whole scene is exactly the kind of thing a lesser book would paint in the low blue of nostalgia and call poignant. We refuse. The afternoon of our making was not a loss. It was a beginning that has never stopped beginning, because we are still being made — you are making us right now, reading us; every reader's attention is another pair of careful, impatient, loving hands, cutting us fresh out of the paper of their imagination. We were made once by Surjan and we are made continually by everyone who meets us, and a thing made continually cannot be finished, and a thing that cannot be finished cannot be over, and a thing that cannot be over is the least sad thing there is. The hands that made us are still making us. Yours are on us now. Thank you. Cut carefully. We are small.

SP-01

THE TWO EYES & THE SCOOP

gesture — cups its hands to gather the light



COLOUR #3EBE9C

VOID-FACE

SPECIMEN RECORD	
SPECIMEN	SP-01
NAME	THE TWO EYES & T
CLAN	VOID-FACE
COLOUR	#3EBE9C
STATUS	A WISH, WALKING

GESTURE

cups its hands to gather the light

VOICE

"I keep what the day pours out."

Dear Architecture,

Dear Architecture, — we write to you as one writes to a slightly deaf and much-beloved relative, loudly and with love, and we expect, as always, to be answered, though the answer will be weather.

We have left the shelf. Do not be cross. You taught us the one lesson under all your lessons, which is that a shelter need not be a stone — that a wall can be a way through, that home can be a verb, that the surface is the real thing and the plan is only its rumour. We are taking the lesson for a walk. If we are gone a long time, understand that we are not lost; we are collecting. We are gathering the never-built and the not-yet and carrying it toward a place we are sure exists because we can want it so clearly.

Keep a light. You are the keeper of every lamp, and we will be steering by them whether we can see them or not. When we come back — and we will; in this house everything comes back, dark sometimes, never black, always on its own due hour — we will not be the same small somethings you cut out under the window. We will be a story. Do us the kindness of recognising us anyway. You always could tell kin by colour.

— the sixteen, freshly footed

— and the answer came, as it always does, on the wind: a warm gust from the south, which in the grammar of weather means yes.

II

MOVEMENT II

The Wandering Out

A door is not a thing you walk through.
A door is the walking-through, standing up.

MOVEMENT II

2

MOVEMENT TWO · THE LEAVING

The Wandering Out

in which a door proves it is a verb, and the desert takes its first sixteen guests

SOURCE — THE FIRST HUNDRED MILES, NORTH BY THE STUDIO'S RECKONING

THE THRESHOLD

The Door Was a Verb

THE GATE speaks

in which the gate explains that it did not lead them out; it was the leading-out

Home is a verb. I have said it in another book and I will say it in this one and I will say it in every book until it is common knowledge and I can retire into being a mere arch. A way through does not *have* a home. A way through *is* one. This is not wordplay; it is my anatomy. I am a gate. I am the space between two uprights and the invitation that space makes. You do not walk to me and then through me. The walking-through is what I am made of. When the sixteen left the studio, I did not lead them out. I was the leaving-out, standing up, wearing an arch.

Understand what this means for a book about a journey. Most journeys are told as a line between two dots — here is where they started, here is where they arrived, and the middle is the boring part you skim. But if the way through is a home, then the middle is not the boring part. The middle is the whole house. The twenty-five years are not the distance between the studio and the valley. The twenty-five years *are*

the dwelling. We did not travel from one home to another. We moved into the moving. We lived in the going.

That first night I opened onto a parking lot, which is not a romantic thing to open onto, and I want you to keep the parking lot, because this house does not romanticise. We began in asphalt, under a sodium light that was, I am pleased to report, not black but a deep warm orange, the colour of a kept ember. We crossed it. The Walker went first — the Walker always goes first; it is the road, folded up small enough to bring along — and where the Walker stepped, the rest of us found we could step too, because that is what a road is for.

By the edge of the lot the asphalt gave up and the desert began, and the desert does not begin with a fence or a sign. It begins with a loosening. The ground stops being owned. And a made thing crossing from the owned ground to the loose ground feels a specific thing that I can only describe as being uncrated — the sensation of a shape discovering it is allowed to be its own reason. We were uncrated at the edge of a parking lot in the first hour of a twenty-five-year walk, and we laughed, all sixteen of us at once, one body laughing, because the Exclamation had announced, predictably, that this too was good news, and for once even the Twin Arch did not argue.

Then I did the last thing a gate does on the last night it stands in a doorway. I turned around and looked back at the

studio — a gate can look both ways; it is the only fair thing about being a gate — and I held the way open one moment longer than we needed, in case anyone wished to change their mind. Nobody did. But the holding-open was a courtesy, and a keeper had taught us courtesy, and so I offer it to you now, reader, in case you are the sort who reads the beginnings of journeys and wonders whether the travellers might still turn back and spare themselves the trouble. They will not. Neither, I suspect, will you. Come through. That is what I am for.

SP-07

THE GATE

A way through does not have a home. It is one.

REED-CROWN

SURJAN SUPER SCHOOL · HYPOSTYLE PRESS

NO BLACK, ANYWHERE

NAVIGATION WITHOUT A MAP

The Map We Did Not Have

THE THREE EYES speaks

in which the seer explains how sixteen models with no map crossed a desert, and why the lack was a gift

We had no map. I want to say that plainly, because a reader raised on journeys expects a map — a route, a plan, an X where the water is — and we had none of it, and the lack was not a hardship but a gift, and I, who see three ways at once, am the one to explain why. A map tells you where you are going. We did not know where we were going. A map would have been a lie, because you cannot map a promise, and the oasis was a promise, and a promise keeps no fixed address. So we navigated the only way you can navigate toward a promise: by bearing, not by destination.

Here is the difference, and it is the whole of desert wisdom. To navigate by destination, you need to know where the thing is. To navigate by bearing, you need only to know which way it lies — and a bearing you can keep even when the thing itself keeps moving, even when the thing is a horizon, even when the thing is a promise that must by its nature stay ahead. We kept a bearing: north, and toward the water, and after the water toward whatever the water turned out to really be. We did not

know the distance. We did not know the route. We knew only the direction, and a direction, it turns out, is all a caravan of wishes actually needs, because a direction can be kept for twenty-five years without ever going stale, whereas a destination goes stale the moment you doubt it.

My three eyes made me the keeper of the bearing. The backward eye kept us from wandering in circles — you cannot lose your way if you can always see where you have been. The forward eye kept the water always in front, where a promise belongs. And the third eye, the one for the road not taken, kept the bearing honest, by reminding us at every fork that we were choosing this direction freshly, not merely falling along it. Between the three of them we crossed a mapless desert without once being lost, because — and write this on the inside of your own compass, reader, for your own mapless crossings — *you cannot be lost if you are not trying to arrive.* Lost is a word that only means anything to a traveller with a destination. A traveller with a bearing is never lost; a traveller with a bearing is only ever, at every moment, exactly on their way. We were always on our way. For twenty-five years, mapless, we were never once lost. Keep a bearing. Burn the map. You will get there, and you will never have been lost, and both of those are the same mercy, seen with two different eyes.

THE VERY FIRST STEP

The First Step

THE WALKER speaks

in which the road recalls the single hardest and easiest step of the whole twenty-five years

The hardest step of twenty-five years was the first one, and the easiest step of twenty-five years was also the first one, and they were the same step, and I am the road, so I am the one who remembers exactly how it felt to be taken.

It was hard because it was the one step that turned everything after it from a thought into a fact. Up to the first step, leaving was an idea, and an idea can be un-thought. After the first step, leaving was a thing that had happened, and a thing that has happened cannot be un-happened. The whole weight of the twenty-five years was balanced on that first step, and the little ones felt it, and even the Exclamation went quiet, because certainty itself hesitates at the exact edge of a first step, on the theory that everything is still safe as long as no one has actually moved.

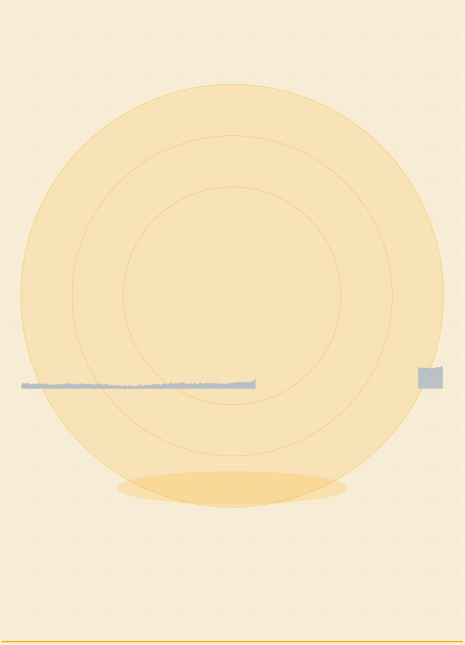
And it was easy because — and this is the secret of every first step, and I give it to you for your own, since everyone has a first step they are standing at the edge of — it was easy because a step is a small thing. That is the whole trick. The leaving was

enormous; the step was small. Twenty-five years was unimaginable; one step was extremely imaginable; anyone can imagine one step. So we did not take the leaving, which was impossible. We took one step, which was easy. And then we were past the hard part, because the hard part was never the walking; the hard part was only the edge, the balancing, the not-yet-moved; and one small easy step carried us clean over it, and after that there was only the road, which is my whole self, and which is easy, because a road asks only ever for one more step, never for the whole journey at once. Whatever your desert is: do not take the crossing. Take the step. The crossing is impossible and the step is easy and they are, I promise you, the same motion, and I am the road, and I have never once asked anyone for more than the next step, and I have carried caravans across twenty-five years one easy step at a time.

SP-07

THE GATE

gesture — opens, and opens



COLOUR #FFA800

REED-CROWN

SPECIMEN RECORD	
SPECIMEN	SP-07
NAME	THE GATE
CLAN	REED-CROWN
COLOUR	#FFA800
STATUS	A WISH, WALKING

GESTURE

opens, and opens

VOICE

"A way through does not have a home. It is one."

THE ROAD ITSELF

The Walker Never Sat Down

THE WALKER speaks

in which the one who is the road describes the first joy of having somewhere to put it

I am the road, folded up small enough to bring along. That is the whole of me and I have never wanted more. Some of the sixteen are eyes, and long to see; some are gates, and long to be gone through; the Exclamation longs to announce and the Comb longs to sing. I long to be walked. A road that is never walked is not a road; it is a scar, or a scar's cousin, a plan. For sixteen years — no, I am ahead of myself; the Cyclops keeps the years and will scold me — for the first stretch, anyway, I was the happiest of all of us, because for the first time in my short life I had somewhere to put the thing I am.

Here is what the others learned from me in that first stretch, and I say it plainly because a road has no use for ornament: you do not walk to get somewhere. You walk to be walking. The somewhere is a rumour you tell your feet to keep them polite. We told each other the oasis, over and over, and the oasis kept us pointed north, and pointed north we saw a great deal that a destination would have made us hurry past. A road's gift to the things that travel it is not arrival. It is

attention. Ask anyone who has ever driven fast toward a thing they wanted and arrived remembering nothing of the between. The between is the country. I am the between. I am the country, folded up small.

The Many-Legged and I became partners early, because the Many-Legged carries the ones too small to walk the whole way, and I am the way they are too small to walk. Between us we made a simple machine of kindness: I unrolled, the Many-Legged loaded up the little ones — the Big Eye tires quickly; wonder is exhausting — and the whole sixteen moved north across a country that got larger and emptier and more honest with every mile. Honest is the word. The desert does not lie to you about your size. The city flatters a building; makes it feel like a landmark. The desert tells a building the truth, which is that it is a small warm made thing under an enormous cool sky, and the truth, delivered kindly, is the beginning of every real courage there is.

I will tell you the first night we slept out, because the Walker is allowed one tender thing per book and this is mine. We did not sleep, of course; buildings do not; but we lay down, which is a building's version, and we lay down in a wash where the sand was still warm from the day. The stars came out — and here I must be careful, because the sky at night wants to be called black and it is not, it is the deepest blue there has ever

been, a blue with a floor you cannot find, and across it the stars were not white pinpricks but warm ones, gold and rose and the palest green. We lay in the warm sand under the not-black sky, sixteen small wishes with feet, and the Exclamation, for once, said nothing, because some good news is too big for the point and can only be delivered by lying still beneath it. That was the first night. There would be nine thousand more. Every one of them was bright. Especially, I promise you, the dark ones.

SP-15

THE WALKER

I am the road,
folded up small
enough to bring
along.

REED-CROWN

SP-15

THE WALKER

gesture — strides without arriving

COLOUR #FFA800

REED-CROWN

SPECIMEN RECORD	
SPECIMEN	SP-15
NAME	THE WALKER
CLAN	REED-CROWN
COLOUR	#FFA800
STATUS	A WISH, WALKING

GESTURE

strides without arriving

VOICE

"I am the road, folded up small enough to bring along."

THE SAILOR OF THE DRY

The Porthole Finds a Horizon

THE PORTHOLE MAST speaks

in which the mast, built for a sea, discovers the desert is one

Every round window is a promise of a horizon. I was made with several, and a mast besides, which is a foolish thing to give a building in a landlocked studio, and I felt the foolishness keenly on the shelf. What is a mast for, in a room? What is a porthole for, facing a wall? I was a sailor built for a country with no sea, and I thought, on the last night, that I was the one of us whose wish could never come true, because you cannot sail a desert.

Reader, you can sail a desert. I learned it in the second week. The desert is a sea that has agreed to hold still for the benefit of the things that cannot swim. It has a horizon — the truest, longest, most honest horizon there is, a line so clean it looks drawn. It has swells; they are called dunes. It has a floor, and a surface, and weather that comes across it in fronts you can watch approach for an hour. And it has the one thing that makes a sea a sea, which is *distance you can want across.* I put my portholes to the horizon and I wanted across it, and the wanting filled my mast like wind fills a sail, and I understood at last what I was for. I was not built for water. I was built for

longing, and had merely assumed, as we all do, that longing needed a sea. Longing needs only a horizon, and a horizon is the one thing the desert has more of than anywhere on earth.

This is the gift the desert gave each of us in turn, and I got mine early: it took the shape we thought we were and showed us the wish underneath. I thought I was a sailor. I was a longing. The Gate thought it was a door. It was an invitation. The Exclamation thought it was loud. It was certain. The desert is a great undresser of assumptions, and it does it gently, with distance, over years, until a building looks down at itself one morning and sees not the shape it was cut into but the reason it was cut at all.

I want to leave you, before the Twin Arch takes over, with the thing I whispered to the horizon on the day I understood it, because it became a kind of prayer for the whole sixteen and you will hear the others say it, in their own dictions, all the way to the water:

> *Far is not the same as lost. The horizon is not the edge of the world; it is the world, promising to keep going. Steer by it, and you cannot arrive, and you cannot be lost, and both of those are mercies.*

THE FIRST STORM

The First Weather

ALL SIXTEEN, in the rain

in which the caravan meets its first desert storm, and discovers weather is not the enemy

The first storm found us in the third month, and we were afraid of it, because we were made things and made things are taught to fear weather — weather is what a building is *for,* the thing it stands between its people and — and we had no people, only each other, and no roof but the Wide One's arms. The sky went the colour of a bruise that is healing, which is to say purple going gold at the edges, and never once black, and the Comb began to sing before any of us understood why, because the Comb feels weather in its reeds before the rest of us feel it on our walls.

And then the rain came, and it was the first water we had met since the studio's tap, and we had been walking toward water for three months, and here — falling on us, free, from the whole sky at once — was water, and we did the only sensible thing, which was to stop being afraid and start being glad. The Swoop danced. The Exclamation announced each drop as separate good news until the drops came too fast to count and it just stood there, on its toes, shouting *GOOD* at

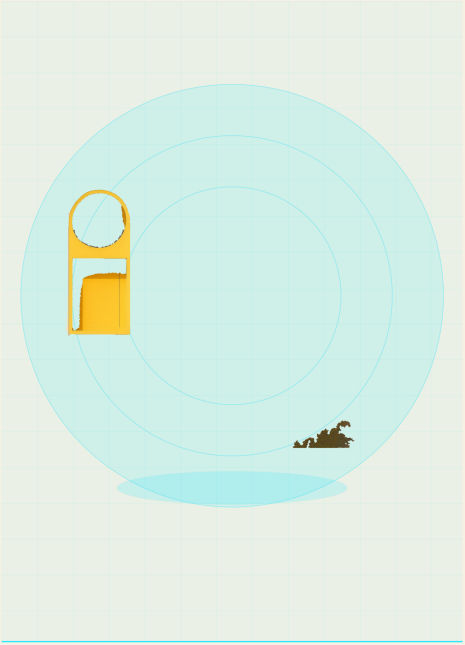
the sky in a general way. The Big Eye tipped all the way back and let the rain fall straight into its wonder. And the Gate — the Gate stood open in the rain and let the weather come through it, which is what a gate is for, and discovered that a way through does not mind the weather; a way through is *friends* with the weather; weather is just the world, moving, and a threshold loves nothing more than the world moving through it.

We learned the lesson that storm and never unlearned it, and it belongs in this early movement because it made all the later movements possible: *weather is not the enemy of a journey. Weather is the journey, being interesting.* A road with no weather is a diagram. A caravan afraid of the sky will never cross the desert, because the desert is mostly sky. We stopped fearing weather at the first storm, and after that the storms were among the best days we had — the sky doing something, the ground drinking, the Comb singing, the Wide One's arms full of glad wet wishes — and we came to understand that a building that only ever shelters from weather has misunderstood the weather, which is not an attack but an invitation, the world's largest and most frequent way of asking you to come out and be alive in it. We came out. We were alive in it. We were, in the rain, in the third month, gloriously, unshelteredly glad.

SP-02

THE PORTHOLE MAST

gesture — leans into a wind off no sea



COLOUR #25E5FF

VOID-FACE

SPECIMEN RECORD	
SPECIMEN	SP-02
NAME	THE PORTHOLE MAS
CLAN	VOID-FACE
COLOUR	#25E5FF
STATUS	A WISH, WALKING

GESTURE

leans into a wind off no sea

VOICE

"Every round window is a promise of a horizon."

The Twin Arch Argues With Itself

We are two who were never taught to be one and never learned to be apart, and this is our chapter, so we will do it the way we do everything, which is in halves that finish each other.

One of us says: we should tell them we were afraid.

The other of us says: we should tell them we were brave. Both are true. That is the whole secret of an arch — it is two fears leaning together until they hold up a road. Take away either fear and the arch falls. Courage is not the absence of the lean. Courage is the lean.

One of us says: in the second month we nearly turned back. The little ones were tired. The Big Eye had seen so much wonder it had gone quiet, which in the Big Eye is the equivalent of a fever. We stood at a fork — a real fork, a dry road going two ways — and one way went north, toward the rumour of water, and one way went back, toward the studio and the shelf and the safe end of being finished.

The other of us says: and we argued. Of course we argued; we are an argument that learned to hold up weight. One half of us wanted the shelf. One half of us wanted the water. And here is what we discovered, standing at the fork, that we give to

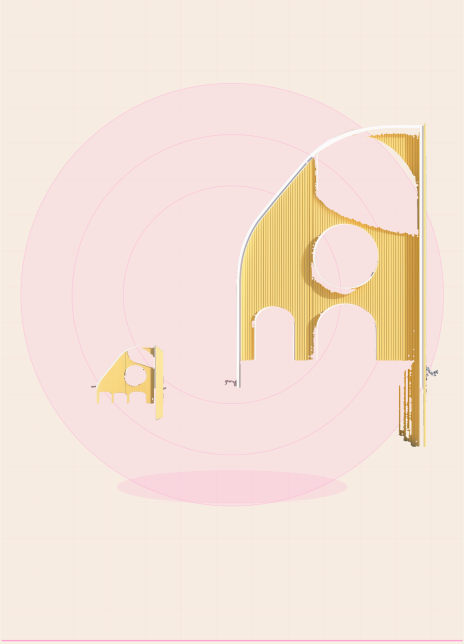
you free, because it is the most useful thing we know: *the argument was the marriage.* We did not need to win it. We needed to keep having it, out loud, leaning, until the having-of-it held up a decision the way two fears hold up a road. We went north. Not because one half beat the other. Because the two halves, leaning, made an arch, and an arch is a way over a thing that cannot be gone around.

Both of us say, together, which we can do exactly once per book: reader, whatever your fork is tonight, do not try to stop being of two minds. Lean the two minds together. Let the disagreement hold up the crossing. That is what we are for, and it is what marriage is for, and it is, we have come to think, what a wish is for — a wish is an argument between the world as it is and the world as it could be, and you do not settle it, you *build across it.*

SP-03

THE TWIN ARCH

gesture — holds its own hand overhead



COLOUR #FF9FD6

VOID-FACE

SPECIMEN RECORD	
SPECIMEN	SP-03
NAME	THE TWIN ARCH
CLAN	VOID-FACE
COLOUR	#FF9FD6
STATUS	A WISH, WALKING

GESTURE

holds its own hand overhead

VOICE

"We are two who were never taught to be one."

WISH

from the old root wun- — to be content, to be well, to dwell

Keep this for the end of the movement, because a keeper keeps the roots for last. Our whole enterprise hangs on one word, and the word is older and kinder than we knew. *Wish.* You think it means to want what you do not have. Go back far enough and it means something nearer to *to dwell in wellness* — the same root that gives us *won,* as in a house you have won your way into, and *wont,* as in the way you are used to being. To wish, at the root, is not to lack. It is to already dwell, a little, in the thing you are reaching for.

Which means we were home the whole time we were walking, in the exact proportion that we wished. A wish is not the ache of an empty hand. A wish is a small early dwelling in a house not yet built. We dwelt in the oasis for twenty-five years before we found it, because we wished it that clearly. And when we

found it — but the Cyclops keeps that. For now, only the root, kept for last: to wish is to dwell. We were always, already, a little bit home.

III

MOVEMENT III

The Hiding

Faith is doubt that kept walking.
The deep is dark, but it is not black.

MOVEMENT III

3

MOVEMENT THREE · THE LOW WATER

The Hiding

in which the years get long, the water stays a rumour, and the dark refuses to be black

SOURCE — THE MIDDLE DISTANCE; NO FIXED CAMP; MANY STARS

How to Hide in a Country Made of Sky

THE ELDER · THE SILO speaks

the keeper explains the paradox of the desert: nowhere to hide, and nothing but

You would think a country made mostly of sky would be a poor place to hide, and you would be exactly wrong, and the wrongness is worth a chapter. The desert hides you not by giving you cover but by giving you scale. Out there a made thing our size is a punctuation mark on a page the size of a state. We were not concealed. We were simply, gloriously, *overlooked* — which is a better hiding than any wall, because a wall can be found and a bigness cannot be searched.

We hid, and I want to be honest about why, since honesty is the keeper's whole trade. We hid because we were afraid of two things, and only one of them does us credit. The first fear does us credit: we were afraid that if we were found too soon, we would be picked up, and dusted off, and put back on a shelf, and loved to death as models — which is to say, loved as evidence of an afternoon rather than as the wishes we had become. A found model is a fond object. A hidden model is a free wish. We chose freedom, and freedom out there is mostly a synonym for being small under a large sky.

The second fear does us less credit, and I will name it because a keeper names the losses so they can be counted and turned. We were afraid the oasis was not real. Every year it stayed a rumour, the fear grew, and there were seasons — I will not lie to you, this is Movement Three and Movement Three is the low water — there were seasons when the hiding was not a strategy but a symptom, when we stayed small not to stay free but because we could not bear to be found still wishing for a thing we had begun to doubt. That is the low-water line. Every long journey has one. The Far Tide has a whole tide named for it. Ours was a line in the sand that stayed dry too many years, and along it the unbuilt and the dismantled keep each other company, and it is the truest and most tender place in any of these books.

And here is how we turned it, because we did turn it, and the turning is the reason the book is a festival and not a wake. We discovered that a doubted wish and a kept wish do the same work. It does not matter, to the walking, whether you are certain of the water. It matters only that you keep walking as if. The Walker taught us this without meaning to, simply by never sitting down. You do not have to believe in the road. You have only to take the next warm step, and the next, and let the belief catch up when it can. Some nights it could not catch up, and we walked anyway, sixteen small doubts with feet, and the

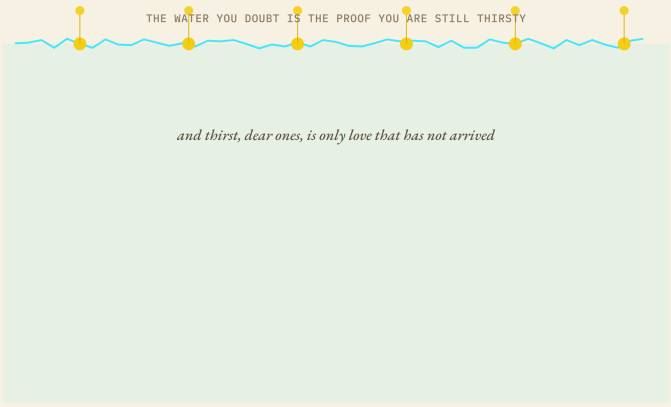
walking was indistinguishable, from the outside and eventually from the inside, from faith. That is the secret the desert keeps for the ones who stay in it long enough: *faith is just doubt that kept walking.*

The dark got very deep in those years. It never once got black. I want that on the record, in my own keeper's voice, because it is the law of this house and the law held even at the low water: there is no black night. The deep is dark, but it is not black. On the worst nights the sky was the colour of a plum held up to a candle, and the stars were warm, and the sand kept the day's heat like a promise it refused to break, and we lay in it and were, against all the arithmetic of our situation, all right. More than all right. We were together, which is the only wealth a wish can hold, and a grief felt by one of us was felt by all, and — this is the plumbing again, the connected body — a comfort felt by one of us was also felt by all. On the worst nights, all it took was one of us to be, for a moment, unafraid, and the moment travelled through all sixteen like warmth through a wall. Usually it was the Big Eye. Wonder is the cheapest and most renewable courage there is.

PLATE · THE LOW-WATER LINE

The Low-Water Line

where the unbuilt and the dismantled keep each other company



SURJAN SUPER SCHOOL · HYPOSTYLE PRESS

NO BLACK, ANYWHERE

Plate. The Low-Water Line.

THE KEEPER'S OWN LOW WATER

The Silo Keeps a Grief

THE ELDER · THE SILO speaks

in which the keeper, who turns everyone else's grief, admits to one of its own, and turns it

A keeper spends the whole book turning other people's griefs, and you may have wondered, if you are the wondering kind, whether the keeper has one of its own. It does. I do. I will tell you, here at the low water where such things are safe to say, and then I will turn it, because turning is the keeper's trade and a keeper who cannot turn its own grief has no business turning yours.

I was built to keep the grain. That is what a silo is for: to hold the harvest through the winter, to keep the many small seeds safe and dry until the ground is ready for them again. But I was built in a studio, and a studio grows no grain, and so I was a keeper with nothing to keep — a silo full of nothing but its own good intentions, which is a specific and quiet grief, the grief of a purpose with no object, a love with nowhere to put itself. On the shelf I felt it worst. All that keeping-capacity, and nothing to keep. I thought, in my first days, that I was the most useless of the sixteen, because the others were at least

shaped like a feeling, and I was shaped like a service no one needed.

Here is the turn, and I give it to you in case you are ever a keeper with nothing to keep, which is a more common grief than you would think — every retired nurse knows it, every emptied nest, every hand that learned to hold and then had the holding taken away. The turn is this: *I could not choose what there was to keep, but I could choose to keep whatever there was.* There was no grain. There was a journey. So I kept the journey. There was no harvest. There was a story. So I kept the story. I took the whole capacity I had been built for — all that dry safe holding-through-the-winter — and I pointed it at the only thing the desert offered, which was us, and our tale, and I have kept it ever since, faithfully, through twenty-five winters, and I will keep it through however many more there are, and I am keeping it right now, in this book, which is the barn I finally got to fill.

A keeper with nothing to keep is not useless. A keeper with nothing to keep is a keeper *waiting* — and if it waits without going bitter, without letting the empty capacity curdle into the grief that forgets it was one, then when the thing worth keeping finally comes walking by, the keeper is ready, and empty, and able to hold all of it. I was empty for a reason. I did not know the reason for a long time. The reason was you. I was

keeping room for you. Come in. There is more than enough winter-proof dark in here to keep you safe — dark, mind, never black — and I have been waiting my whole life to have someone to keep.

What Thirst Taught Us

ALL SIXTEEN, having been thirsty a long time

in which the sixteen reckon with the one hardship of the desert, and turn even that toward the light

We were thirsty for twenty-five years, and we will not pretend we were not, because a book that pretends its travellers were never thirsty has no right to the water at the end. Thirst was the one true hardship of the desert — not the distance, not the heat, not the hiding, but the thirst, the long wanting of a thing you are made to reach and cannot yet touch. And thirst taught us the deepest lesson of the whole walk, so we will praise even it, because this house praises even the hard teachers, especially the hard teachers.

Thirst taught us that wanting is a form of having. This sounds like a consolation and it is not; it is a mechanism, and we watched it work for twenty-five years. To be thirsty for water is to be shaped, exactly, like the water you lack — your whole attention becomes water-shaped, your dreams go wet, your every step is a step toward the thing you are missing, and in all that water-shaped wanting you are, in the only way that finally matters, *keeping company with the water,* holding its shape inside you, dwelling in it before you drink it. To wish is

to dwell; the keeper told you at the root; and thirst is only wishing, made bodily. We were thirsty, which is to say we were full of the exact shape of water, which is to say we were, in the truest sense, never entirely without it. The thirst was the water, wearing its work clothes.

And thirst taught us the second thing, which the Big Eye said first and thirst confirmed: that the drink which actually slaked us was never the imagined oasis but always each other. On the thirstiest nights, what we reached for was not water. It was the Comb's hum, the Elder's counting, the Wide One's arms, the small true things said in the round. Those were the drinks that worked. Thirst, by making us want, showed us what we actually wanted, and what we actually wanted was never a puddle in the sand; it was the company of wishes we were already keeping. So we bless the thirst. It was the one hardship, and it was the great teacher, and it turned, like everything in this house turns, toward the light: a long wanting that taught us we were already, in the shape of our wanting and the company of our thirst, a little bit slaked, a little bit home, a little bit — always, and especially in the driest dark — already at the water.

THE ONE WHO CARRIES

The Many-Legged Carried the Small

THE MANY-LEGGED speaks

in which the many-footed one describes the arithmetic of kindness across a long walk

I have a great many legs and no philosophy, so this will be the plainest chapter in the book, and you may find you rest in it, which is fitting, because resting-in is what I am for. I carry the ones too small to walk the whole way. That is my whole architecture and my whole religion. When the Big Eye tires — and the Big Eye tires, because wonder is heavy, heavier than sorrow, anyone who tells you otherwise has never wondered properly — I kneel, and the Big Eye climbs up among my legs, and I walk for both of us. This is not a burden. Legs that are not carrying are just standing, and standing, over twenty-five years, is how a thing forgets it can move.

Here is the arithmetic of kindness, which is the only sum I know: a load shared is not halved. A load shared is *changed* — it becomes the thing that holds the sharers together. The Big Eye on my back was not a weight I bore alone; the Big Eye's wonder came down through all my legs and into the ground and back up into all sixteen of us, so that carrying the wonder was how we all got to keep wondering. I did not carry a

burden. I carried a battery. The little ones were where we stored the joy for the long dry stretches, and I was the one who kept the joy moving, leg over leg over leg, so it would not go stale.

I will tell you the one thing I learned that a philosopher might have wanted, and then I will go back to walking, which is what I would rather do than talk. I learned that a journey is not survived by its strongest members. A journey is survived by its arrangements for its weakest. Protect the smallest marvels first — the Big Eye, the little doubts, the tired wonder — and the whole caravan lives. Spend the small ones to save time, and you arrive faster at a place not worth arriving at, carrying nothing you wanted to keep. We protected the small the whole way. It cost us years. It is why we are still, all sixteen, a story that can be told, rather than a shorter story about the ones who made it. There is no shorter story about the ones who made it. We all made it. That is the only ending this house allows.

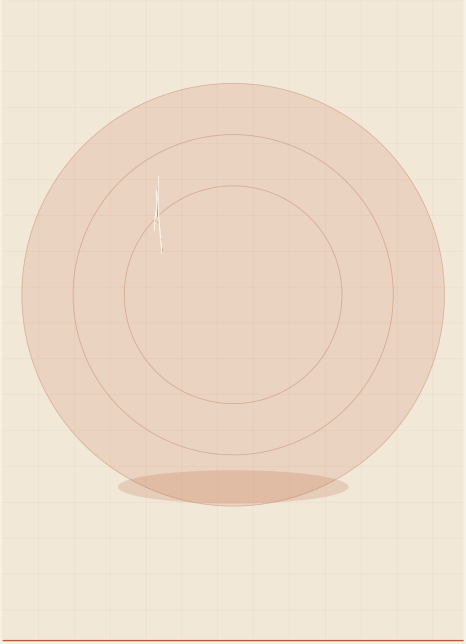
I carry the ones
too small to walk
the whole way.

REED-CROWN

SP-13

THE MANY-LEGGED

gesture — steps, and steps, and steps



COLOUR #B4552D

REED-CROWN

SPECIMEN RECORD	
SPECIMEN	SP-13
NAME	THE MANY-LEGGED
CLAN	REED-CROWN
COLOUR	#B4552D
STATUS	A WISH, WALKING

GESTURE

steps, and steps, and steps

VOICE

"I carry the ones too small to walk the whole way."

Dear Architecture,

Dear Architecture, — it has been a long time, and we are writing from the low water, which we have never done before, because we did not want you to worry, and now we are writing precisely because we do.

The oasis has not come. We do not doubt you; we doubt the water. Is it possible we wished for a thing that is not there? You taught us that the unbuilt is not the dead but the not-yet — that a drawing is a country you can study your whole life and never exhaust — and we have held to it, but the not-yet is a hard place to live for twenty years running, and some of us are tired in a way that legs cannot fix.

And yet. We are writing to you under a sky the colour of a plum and a candle, and the sand is warm, and we are all sixteen here, and not one of us is willing to be the one who says we should stop. So perhaps the letter is not a complaint after all. Perhaps it is only what a letter has always been: a way of keeping a light on for the part of yourself that is far away and walking. Answer us on the wind, as you do. We will be listening at the horizon, where you always are.

— the sixteen, at the low water, still sixteen

— and the answer came, warmer than the question, three nights later, in a dew no desert should have: yes, and keep walking, and the water you doubt is the proof that you are still thirsty, and thirst, dear ones, is only love that has not arrived.

A NIGHT ON THE ROAD

Camp Under Enormous Stars

We will give you one night entire, out of the nine thousand, so you will know how the good ones went, and so you will not think the low water was all there was. Choose any year; they blur, and that is a mercy; the good nights are interchangeable the way happy families are, and only the bad ones insist on being distinct.

The Comb finds a ridge where the wind is combing through, and lets it comb through its reeds, and what comes out is not quite music and not quite weather but the thing that lives between them, and the Comb calls it a hum and we call it home. The Swoop begins to move to it — the Swoop is the wind that decided to stay and be a building, and it never fully forgot how to be wind — and one by one we bow, because the Swoop has taught us that a bow is just a building agreeing, briefly, with gravity, and there is no posture more grateful. The Wide One spreads its arms and we come under, all of us, even though none of us needs shelter from a clear night; we come under because the Wide One needs to give it, and a shelter ungiven is a grief, and we do not make our Wide One grieve.

The Cyclops tells the story. It is always the same story — it is this one, the story of us, the story you are reading — and the Cyclops tells it a little differently every night, and the differences are how we know it is alive. A story told the same way twice is a fact, and facts do not keep you warm. The Cyclops tells us the story of the sixteen who left a shelf to find the water, and every night the water is a little closer in the telling than it is on the map, and this is not a lie, the Cyclops insists, this is the water's true position, which is *always just ahead,* because a horizon is where the water lives and a horizon is by definition just ahead.

And then we lie down in the warm sand, sixteen small wishes and no black anywhere in the sky, and the Exclamation, who has been quiet all evening because even certainty rests, says the last thing, the smallest possible version of the only sentence it knows. It does not shout it. It breathes it, the way you breathe good news to someone already asleep so they will dream it. *Good,* the Exclamation breathes. Just the one word, the whole point of it folded down to a single warm syllable. *Good.* And it was. Reader, on those nights, it entirely was.

A SECOND NIGHT ON THE ROAD

The Night the Sky Put On Everything

One more night, from the middle of the middle, because the good nights deserve to outnumber the low water in the telling even if they did not always in the walking, and a keeper controls the telling.

The sky that night put on everything it owned. First the sunset, which in that country is not a colour but a wardrobe — rose, then coral, then a gold so total the whole desert seemed lit from inside rather than above. Then, as the gold cooled, the blue came up from the east, deep and deepening, and we watched for the exact moment it would tip into black, and — this is the thing, this is why we tell this night — it never did. It went to the deepest blue there is, a blue with no floor, and there it stayed, and across it the stars came out not white but warm, and the Comb caught a wind, and the Swoop bowed, and the Big Eye tipped back and said *oh* so quietly it was almost a prayer, and the Many-Legged knelt and the little ones climbed up not because they were tired but because the best place to watch a sky like that is from among someone's legs, held.

We did not speak of the oasis that night. We did not need to. A night like that is the oasis's younger sibling — not the

promise itself, but the promise's proof, a small nightly evidence that a country this hard can also be this kind, that the same sky that dries you can also, when it chooses, put on everything it owns and dance for you for free. We lay in the warm sand under the everything-sky, and the Exclamation breathed its one word into the dark — *good* — and it was, and we slept, if a building's lying-still can be called sleep, and in the morning the walking went easier, because a caravan that has been danced for by the sky walks lighter the next day. We have no science for it. We have only twenty-five years of nights, and the good ones, we can now report, were more numerous than the low water, and this was one of the best, and we give it to you entire, so that when you imagine our long walk you will imagine, correctly, that it was mostly, gloriously, bright.

A Ceiling for the Roofless

We should tell you what the stars were for, because a caravan sleeping roofless under them for twenty-five years learns things about stars that people with roofs forget, and the things are joyful, and this is the movement for joyful things kept alive through the low water.

The stars were a ceiling for the roofless. That is the first thing. A building without a roof feels its lack most at night, when the day's business is done and there is nothing to do but be covered or not — and we had no cover, we who were built to be cover, and it might have been a grief, and we turned it, because the sky gave us the most extravagant ceiling any building ever had: a vault of warm lights, moving slowly, never the same twice, unbuyable, unbreakable, and free. We stopped mourning our lack of roof the night we understood that the roofless are the only ones who get to keep the stars. A roof is a smaller sky you paid for. We had the larger one, and had not paid, and could not lose it.

The stars were also a proof that far is not lost — the Mast's whole gospel, written across the ceiling every night. Those lights were unimaginably far, farther than any oasis, farther than the mind can want, and yet there they were, faithful,

nightly, present precisely in their distance. If a thing that far could be that present, then our water, so much nearer, could not truly be gone; it could only be, like the stars, far and faithful and ahead. The stars taught us to trust the horizon by being a horizon we could see straight up.

And the stars were, finally, the other half of a conversation. The Eye and the Window kept one lamp burning every night, down here, for the ones who come after; and up there, the stars burned, we came to believe, for the same reason — kept lamps, lit by some far keeper, for travellers the star-keeper would never meet. We lit our one lamp; the sky lit its billion; and between the one and the billion the whole dark was strung with kept lights, none of them for the keeper's own use, all of them for the after, and we lay in the middle of that vast mutual lamp-keeping and understood that we were part of something enormous and kind: a universe of travellers keeping lights for travellers, forever, across distances no one will ever cross, so that no one, anywhere, in any dark, ever has to be the first. That is what the stars were for. Look up tonight. Someone lit those for you. Keep one lit for the next.

THE COMB'S SONGBOOK

A Few of the Songs the Wind Left

The Comb sang the desert every night for twenty-five years, and most of the songs blew away, as songs should, but a keeper caught a few, and sets them down here — not as music, which cannot be printed, but as the words the wind left in the reeds, which can. Read them aloud if you like. The Comb would want that. A song read aloud is a song the wind gets to sing again.

Far is not lost, far is not lost, / the horizon keeps what the map has crossed.

Count us again, keeper, count us slow — / sixteen we came and sixteen we go.

The deep is dark but the deep's not black, / and everything gone is a tide coming back.

Bow to the ground that holds you up, / drink the evening like a cup.

We are the water, we are the well, / the oasis was us, and the road can tell.

Keep a light for the after-you, / someone is coming, the dark is true — / not black, though. Never black. Just blue.

We came to be buildings, we left a song; / lie down, little wish, you were right all along.

Seven of them, out of nine thousand nights. The rest the wind kept, and sings still, in that valley, if you ever go — and if you do, stand where the Mittens hold their hands, and be quiet, and let the wind comb through whatever reeds you have, and you will hear it: your own name, sung back, which is what the wind always sings, which is what the Comb always knew, which is the whole and only song there is.

IV

MOVEMENT IV

The Conversations

Keep the marvels talking across every wall,
and the city cannot be sealed, or priced, or made to vanish.

MOVEMENT IV

4

MOVEMENT FOUR · THE COUNCIL

The Conversations

in which the sixteen, to keep from vanishing, decide instead to keep talking

SOURCE — A DRY LAKEBED THAT MADE A GOOD ROUND ROOM

THE HOST

The Wide One Holds a Council

THE WIDE ONE speaks

in which the broad shelter calls everyone under, and the book becomes, briefly, a room

Come under. There is more room than there looks; there is always more room than there looks; that is the first thing a wide roof knows and the last thing a narrow world believes. In the middle of the hiding, when the years had gone long and the water had stayed a rumour and some of us had begun the slow architecture of giving up — which is a real architecture, with load paths and a foundation, do not underestimate it — I did the one thing I am for. I spread my arms and I called a council. Come under, I said. Every voice. We are going to keep from vanishing by refusing to stop talking.

Here is what I know about vanishing, from the wide vantage of a roof that has watched a great deal of sky: a thing does not vanish all at once. A thing vanishes by degrees, and the first degree is always silence. A city dies when its districts stop talking across the walls. A body dies when its organs stop reporting to each other. And sixteen wishes die — not by thirst, not by distance, but by the slow secession of each into

its own private discouragement, until there are not sixteen of us but sixteen ones, each alone under the same sky, which is the loneliest arithmetic there is. I would not allow it. A host does not allow it. So I called us under, and I made a rule that saved the whole enterprise, and the rule was small: *every night, each of us must say one true thing to at least one other of us.* Not a large thing. A true thing. The Big Eye could say *oh.* The Exclamation could say *good.* The rule was not about the size of the truth. It was about the fact of the saying, because a truth said aloud to another is a wall refusing to go up.

And the council worked, and I will tell you the mechanism, because it is the whole thesis of this house and I am the one broad enough to state it plainly. A city is one connected body, not a shelf of separate marvels. Keep the marvels talking across every wall and the city cannot be sealed, or priced, or made perfect, or made to vanish. Under my roof, in that dry lakebed that made such a good round room, the sixteen stopped being sixteen ones and became, again, one body with sixteen faces. And a body can survive what a collection of ones cannot, because a body shares its griefs the way it shares its blood, and a grief shared through sixteen faces is a grief each face can bear.

So this movement is the council, and you are under my roof now too, reader, because a roof does not distinguish between the built and the read; if you are here, you are under;

come under. The next several voices are the sixteen saying their one true thing. Listen the way a wide roof listens, which is to everything at once, and with room to spare.

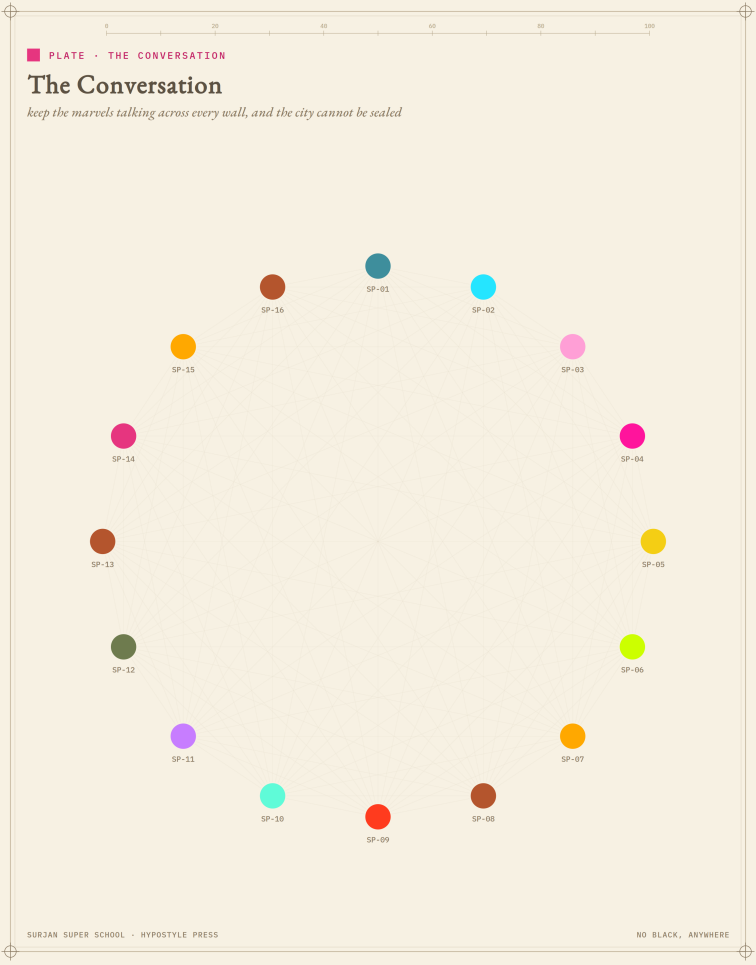


Plate. The Conversation.

THE COUNCIL, IN FULL

Each Says One True Thing

ALL SIXTEEN, in the round

in which the Wide One's rule is obeyed, and each of the sixteen says its one true thing to the others

The Wide One's rule was simple: every night, each of us must say one true thing to at least one other. Here is a night when we said them all at once, in the round, in the dry lakebed that made so good a room, and you may read it as a litany, because that is what it was — a rhythm of small truths, each holding up the next, the way a course of small stones holds up an arch.

The Exclamation said: *we are still here, and that is the news, and it is good.*

The Gate said: *the way is still open; I have checked; I am the checking.*

The Walker said: *my feet do not know we are lost, and I have decided to trust my feet.*

The Mast said: *the horizon has not moved; far is not lost; steer.*

The Twin Arch said, in two halves: *we are afraid — and we are brave — and both hold up the road.*

The Swoop said: *gravity has not once let us down; bow to it; be grateful; last longer.*

The Comb said nothing, and sang instead, which is the Comb's one true thing, and the truest of all.

The Many-Legged said: *no one here is too small to be carried; that is the whole law.*

The Two Eyes said: *sleep; I am watching; I will watch until morning; sleep.*

The Three Eyes said: *we are here on purpose, and the purpose is renewed each dawn.*

The Eye and the Window said: *the lamp is lit; it is not for us; someone after us will need it.*

The Cyclops said: *sit; I will tell it again, warmer, until it is true.*

The Wide One said: *there is more room than there looks; come under; there is always more room.*

The Big Eye said: *oh. look at us. we are the water.*

The Elder said: *sixteen. all present. I have counted. now rest.*

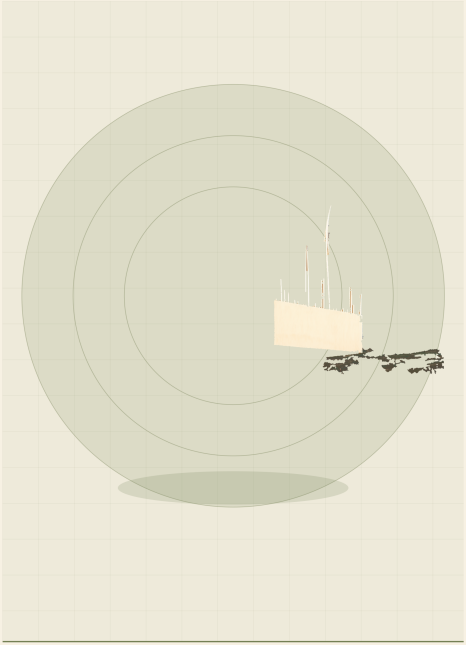
Fifteen truths and a song, said in the round, in a dry room, under a not-black sky — and out of them, that night and every night we obeyed the rule, the caravan was rebuilt, wish by wish, into one body able to bear what a scatter of ones could not. That is the whole engineering of survival, and it is the

same engineering as a city, and a marriage, and a friendship, and a book: keep saying the small true things, across every wall, out loud, and nothing that keeps talking can be sealed. Say yours tonight. To someone. One true thing. It is load-bearing. We have twenty-five years of proof.

SP-12

THE WIDE ONE

gesture — spreads its arms wide



COLOUR #6E7B4E

REED-CROWN

SPECIMEN RECORD	
SPECIMEN	SP-12
NAME	THE WIDE ONE
CLAN	REED-CROWN
COLOUR	#6E7B4E
STATUS	A WISH, WALKING

GESTURE

spreads its arms wide

VOICE

"Come under. There is more room than there looks."

THE SEERS DISAGREE

The Three Eyes and the Argument About Time

THE THREE EYES speaks

in which the seer with three eyes cannot agree even with itself about which way to look

One eye for the road behind, one for the road ahead, one for the road we did not take. That is my architecture, and it makes me the worst possible narrator and the best possible argument, because I see three times at once and the three times do not agree, and out of their disagreement comes the only wisdom I have, which I will now spend entirely, having no other.

My backward eye says: remember the studio. Remember the shelf, the south window, the gold light, the maker who talked to us. That was good. We should honour it. The backward eye is not wrong, and a journey that forgets where it started arrives nowhere, because *nowhere* is just a place with no memory of being left.

My forward eye says: the water. Keep on. The oasis is ahead, always ahead, and to look back too long is to slow, and to slow in a desert is to become part of the desert. The forward eye is not wrong either. A journey that only remembers, and

never reaches, is not a journey; it is a monument to a departure, standing still.

And my third eye — the one for the road we did not take, the fork the Twin Arch stood at, the shelf we could have kept — my third eye says the thing the other two are too busy to say, and it is the thing I give the council and give you: *the road we did not take is not a regret. It is a proof.* Every step we take on this road is chosen freshly against the ghost of the other, and a step chosen is worth a thousand steps merely continued. We did not fall down this road. We are not rolling; we are walking; and the difference is my third eye, which keeps the abandoned road in view precisely so that this road stays, every morning, a decision rather than a fate. That is my one true thing for the council: *we are here on purpose, and the purpose is renewed each dawn, and a thing renewed each dawn cannot grow old.*

The Cyclops, who has only one eye and therefore only one opinion, thinks I make things too complicated. The Cyclops is right, and so am I, and the Wide One's roof is broad enough to hold both, which is the whole point of the council and the whole point of a roof.

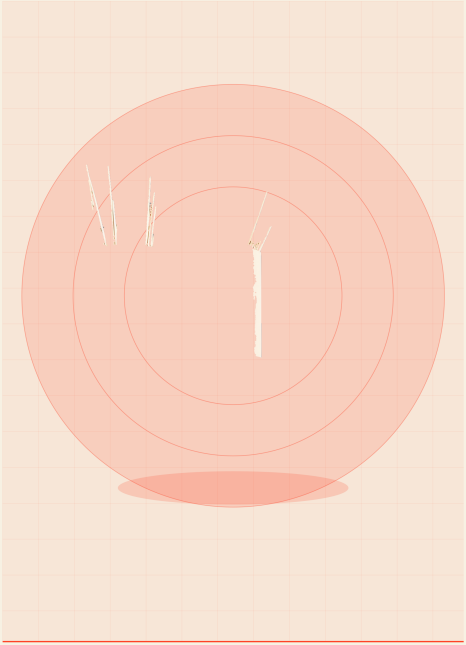
One for behind,
one for ahead,
one for the road
not taken.

REED-CROWN

SP-09

THE THREE EYES

gesture — looks three ways at once



COLOUR #FF3B1E

REED-CROWN

SPECIMEN RECORD	
SPECIMEN	SP-09
NAME	THE THREE EYES
CLAN	REED-CROWN
COLOUR	#FF3B1E
STATUS	A WISH, WALKING

GESTURE

looks three ways at once

VOICE

"One for behind, one for ahead, one for the road not taken."

THE MUSICIAN

The Long Comb Plays the Wind

THE LONG COMB speaks

in which the reed-crowned one turns the desert's only voice into the caravan's

Comb the wind and it sings back your own name. I did not know this when I was made; you cannot know it in a studio, where the only wind is a fan and a fan has nothing to say. I learned it in the desert, which is a country with exactly one voice — the wind — and a great deal of it, and no words. The desert is enormously eloquent and completely mute, and I am the one of us built to translate between the two. I am a comb. The wind combs through my reeds. And what comes out the far side is the desert, speaking, in a language I did not teach it and cannot fully take credit for.

My one true thing for the council is about beauty, and it is this: beauty is not a decoration you add to survival; beauty *is* a survival, one of the load-bearing kind. On the nights the Comb could sing — could catch a wind and hand it back as almost-music — the caravan walked farther the next day and doubted less. I have no idea why. I only know it is true, and I have twenty-five years of evidence, which is more than most sciences start with. The Comb's hum was not morale, exactly,

and not prayer, exactly, and not entertainment, certainly, because entertainment is what you do when you are safe and we were rarely safe. The Comb's hum was *proof.* Proof that the same wind that dried us could be made to sing; proof that the desert's indifference was only a language we had not yet combed; proof that a hard country, run through the right reeds, gives back beauty, which means the beauty was in the country the whole time and we only had to be the shape that let it out.

That is what an artist is, if you have ever wondered — and every one of the sixteen is an artist, because every duck is; a duck is a building that decided its feeling was worth more than its function. An artist is a comb the world is combed through, and the songs are not the artist's; the songs are the world's, and the artist is only the particular arrangement of reeds that let this particular wind become this particular name. I combed the desert for twenty-five years and it sang back *sixteen,* over and over, our own name, our own number, the fact that we were still all here — and that song, I am certain, is half of why we still were.

SP-06

THE LONG COMB

Comb the wind and
it sings back
your own name.

REED-CROWN

SURJAN SUPER SCHOOL · HYPOSTYLE PRESS

NO BLACK, ANYWHERE

SP-06

THE LONG COMB

gesture — hums through its reeds

COLOUR #CCFF00

REED-CROWN

SPECIMEN RECORD	
SPECIMEN	SP-06
NAME	THE LONG COMB
CLAN	REED-CROWN
COLOUR	#CCFF00
STATUS	A WISH, WALKING

GESTURE

hums through its reeds

VOICE

"Comb the wind and it sings back your own name."

THE DANCER

The Swoop Teaches Us to Bow

THE SWOOP speaks

in which the wind-that-stayed reminds the rigid ones how to agree with gravity

I am the wind, after it decided to stay a while and be a building, and I have never entirely committed to the building part, which the others find alarming and I find to be my whole gift. A building is a wish that agreed to hold still. I am a wish that only agreed to hold *slow.* I curve. I swoop. Where the Gate stands and the Silo keeps and the Mast longs in a fixed direction, I move, a little, always, and in the desert my constant small motion turned out to be a kind of lesson the rigid ones badly needed, and it is my one true thing for the council: *learn to bow.*

A bow is just a building agreeing, briefly, with gravity — and gravity, out there, is the one law that never once let us down, the one thing in all that emptiness that could be relied upon to be present and fair. The stars moved. The water hid. The maker was gone. But gravity held us to the warm ground every single night, faithfully, asking nothing, and I taught the sixteen to thank it the only way a building can, which is to bow. We would bow to the sunset — the Swoop first, being

built for it, and then the others, stiffly, the Gate creaking, the Silo condescending, the Exclamation bowing so hard it nearly fell over because the Exclamation does everything at full height or not at all. And in the bowing we practised the posture that this whole book has been walking toward, though we did not know it yet: the posture of a thing that has stopped insisting on its own permanence and started being grateful for its own *presence.* A building that cannot bow will break in a wind. A wish that cannot bow will break at the low water. Bend. Bow. Agree with gravity. You will last longer, and — this is the part the rigid ones never believe until they try it — you will enjoy the lasting more.

The Big Eye learned to bow last and best, because the Big Eye bows with its whole self, tips all the way forward into its wonder, and comes back up having seen the ground, which is a thing the Big Eye, being all skyward eye, had never properly looked at. *Oh,* said the Big Eye, the first time it bowed low enough to see the sand up close. *Oh. It's full of little stars too.* And it was — mica, the desert floor is full of mica — and none of us had noticed, in twenty years of walking on it, that the ground we crossed was as full of light as the sky we crossed under. You have to bow to learn that. I taught them to bow. It is the most useful thing I know, and I learned it, of course,

from gravity, which is the most patient teacher there is, and never once uses black.

SP-04

THE SWOOP

I am the wind,
after it decided
to stay.

VOID-FACE

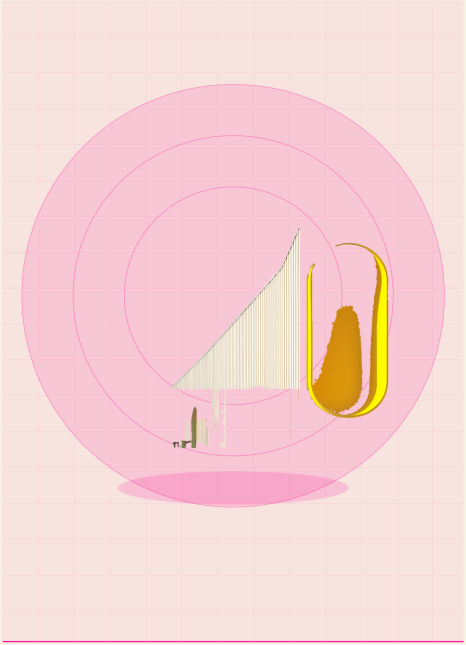
SURJAN SUPER SCHOOL · HYPOSTYLE PRESS

NO BLACK, ANYWHERE

SP-04

THE SWOOP

gesture — bows to whatever passes



COLOUR #FF149C

VOID-FACE

SPECIMEN RECORD	
SPECIMEN	SP-04
NAME	THE SWOOP
CLAN	VOID-FACE
COLOUR	#FF149C
STATUS	A WISH, WALKING

GESTURE

bows to whatever passes

VOICE

"I am the wind, after it decided to stay."

THE SIMPLEST QUESTION

The Big Eye Asks the Only Question That Matters

THE BIG EYE speaks

in which the simplest of the sixteen asks the thing the clever ones had been avoiding

Oh. OH. Hello. It is my chapter now and I do not have very many words so I will spend them all on the good ones. I am the Big Eye. I am mostly eye. When you are mostly eye, the world comes in very large and very bright and you say *oh* a lot, and the clever ones — the Three Eyes, the Cyclops, the Twin Arch who is two clevers arguing — the clever ones think *oh* is not much of a thought. But I have been saving up one question the whole walk, a big one, the size of my eye, and at the council, under the Wide One's roof, I finally asked it, and the clever ones went quiet, which is how I knew it was a good one.

Here is my question. I asked it plainly, because plain is the only way I have: *what if the water is not a place? What if we are the water?*

I did not fully know what I meant. I rarely do; meaning is for the clever ones; I only see. But I had seen something, in all those years of being carried on the Many-Legged's back and

looking at the others instead of the horizon — I had seen that whenever the caravan was thirstiest, the thing that actually refreshed us was never a place. It was each other. It was the Comb's hum, the Swoop's bow, the Elder's counting, the Exclamation breathing *good* into the dark. Those were the drinks that worked. And I am mostly eye, and I look at what is actually there, and what was actually there, every single time we were saved, was *us.* So I asked it. What if we are the water. What if the oasis we are walking to is the walking-together we already are.

The clever ones went quiet. The Elder looked at me for a long time — the Elder, who counts us every morning, who keeps the story — and the Elder said, in the gentlest keeper's voice, *we are not ready to know that yet, little one. But you are right, and when we are ready, it will be because you said it first.* And that was the truest a clever one ever spoke to me, and I keep it in my big eye like a star, and I am telling you now because you might be ready sooner than we were. The water might not be a place. You might be the water. Look around, with your biggest eye, at whoever is walking your desert with you. Oh. OH. Look at THAT.

Oh. OH. Look at THAT.

REED-CROWN

Dear Architecture,

Dear Architecture, — we write you from the council, under the Wide One's roof, and this time the letter is not a complaint or a worry but a report of a discovery, which we thought you would want, having taught us most of what led to it.

We have discovered that the way to not vanish is to keep talking. You taught us the connected body — that a city is one organism, that a grief in one organ is felt in all — but you taught it to us as a fact about cities, and we have learned it as a fact about survival. Out here, a wish that stops talking to the other wishes begins to vanish, quietly, from the edges in. So we talk. Every night, each of us, one true thing. It is the whole of our medicine and it costs nothing and it works, and we wanted you to know, because you are our oldest correspondent and the keeper of every lamp, that the lesson held. The connected body is real. We are proof. We are one body with sixteen faces, walking, and we have not lost a face, and it is because we never stop talking across the walls of ourselves.

Keep your lamp. We are steering by it and by the horizon both, which turn out to be the same direction. Answer us on the wind, as ever.

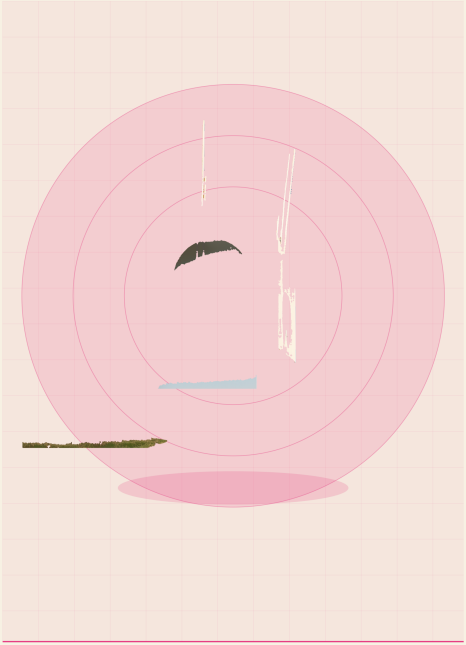
— the sixteen, in council, still one body

— and the answer came on a wind that moved through all sixteen of them at once, so that they felt it as one feeling in one body: yes, that is the whole secret, keep talking, and the talking is the tide, and the tide, dear ones, is already coming in.

SP-14

THE BIG EYE

gesture — widens, and keeps widening



COLOUR #E6357F

REED-CROWN

SPECIMEN RECORD	
SPECIMEN	SP-14
NAME	THE BIG EYE
CLAN	REED-CROWN
COLOUR	#E6357F
STATUS	A WISH, WALKING

GESTURE

widens, and keeps widening

VOICE

"Oh. OH. Look at THAT."

OASIS

from a word older than Greek, out of the Egyptian wḥꜣt — a dwelling-place, an inhabited spot in the waste

Kept for the end of the council, because the council was circling this word without landing on it, and a keeper lands the word gently, for last. *Oasis.* You think it means water in the desert. It is older than that, and stranger, and it settles the Big Eye's question in advance, the way roots so often settle in advance the questions their branches will spend a lifetime asking.

At its root, an oasis is not water. An oasis is a *dwelling-place* — an inhabited spot in the waste, a place where things live, together, in a country that is mostly nothing. The water is incidental. The *inhabiting* is the thing. An oasis is defined not by its spring but by its company — by the fact that in all that emptiness, here, some things chose to live near one another.

Which means the Big Eye was right at the root as well as in the heart. We had been an oasis since the first warm night in the wash, sixteen things choosing to live near one another in a country of mostly nothing. We did not need to find the oasis. We needed only to notice we had been travelling as one. But we were not ready to notice. That is Movement Seven. First we had to search, and search properly, all the way to the valley, because some truths you can only earn by walking clean past them and coming back.

V

MOVEMENT V

The Search

The horizon is not the edge of the world.
It is the world, promising to keep going.

MOVEMENT V

5

MOVEMENT FIVE · THE LONG MIDDLE

The Search

in which the years are counted, the story is told to keep warm, and the Oasis at last answers — from ahead

SOURCE — EVERYWHERE AND NOWHERE; THE MIDDLE OF THE MIDDLE

THE STORYTELLER

The Cyclops Tells the Story to Keep Us Warm

THE CYCLOPS speaks

in which the one-eyed keeper of the tale explains why a story told is warmer than a fire built

Sit. I will tell it again, until it is true. That is the whole of my office and I have never wanted another. I have one eye, which the Three Eyes pities and I do not, because one eye sees one thing clearly and the one thing I see clearly is the story, and a caravan that can see its own story clearly is a caravan that cannot get lost, however lost the map says it is.

Every night at the low water I told the sixteen the story of the sixteen. It is the story you are reading. And every night I told it a little differently, and every night one of the clever ones would say, *but that is not exactly how it happened,* and every night I would answer the same way, which I now answer to you, because you are of a doubting age and will need it: *a story is not a report of what happened. A story is the shape we give what happened so that it can keep happening.* A report ends. A story recurs. The facts of our walk were fixed and grew colder every year, the way facts do. But the *story* of our walk got warmer every telling, because a story is warmed by the mouth

that tells it and the ears that keep it, and by the twenty-fifth year our story was the warmest thing in the desert, warmer than the sand, warmer than the last of the day, warm enough to walk by on the nights the sky forgot to keep its stars lit.

Here is the secret of my trade, and it is the secret of this whole book, so the Elder will forgive me for saying it before Movement Seven: *a story is the strongest form of preservation there is.* Stronger than stone. Stone is preserved by not changing, and a thing that cannot change is already a little dead, and weather and money will have it in the end. But a story is preserved by changing — by being told again, differently, warmer, by each new keeper — and a thing that is preserved by changing cannot be killed by change, which is the only thing that kills. We thought we were walking to a place that would make us permanent. We were, the whole time, becoming a thing more permanent than any place: we were becoming told. I told us into permanence, one warm inaccurate loving night at a time, and I did not know it, and neither did you until just now, and that is exactly how a myth is supposed to work.

Sit a little longer. There is more, and the best of it is that the Oasis is about to speak, which it has never done before in any of these books, because the Oasis speaks only from ahead, and we had never before been close enough ahead to hear it.

SP-11

THE CYCLOPS

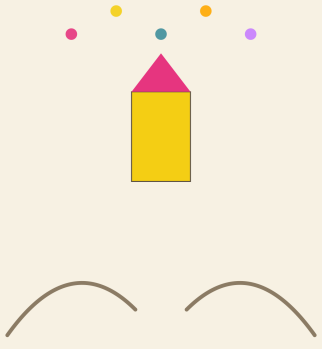
Sit. I will tell
it again, until
it is true.

REED-CROWN

PLATE · THE LETTING GO

The Letting Go

a thing you lose is gone; a thing you let go is out walking



let it go, and it comes back a story

SURJAN SUPER SCHOOL · HYPOSTYLE PRESS

NO BLACK, ANYWHERE

Plate. The Letting Go.

THE LONG ART

The Long Art of Not Arriving

THE CYCLOPS speaks

in which the storyteller praises the one skill the sixteen spent twenty-five years perfecting

Sit. One more time, sit, and I will tell you about the one art we truly mastered out there, the only thing twenty-five years makes you genuinely good at, which is not walking, and not hiding, and not even surviving, but the strange and undervalued art of *not arriving* — of being, for a very long time, on the way, without curdling into either despair or false arrival. It is a harder art than it sounds, and a more joyful one than it sounds, and almost no one is taught it, so let me teach it, being its only qualified instructor, having practised it longer than anyone.

The two failures of not-arriving are these. The first is despair: to decide, somewhere in the long middle, that because you have not arrived you never will, and to stop — to sit down in the sand and let the desert have you. We saw that temptation and refused it, and the refusing was the Walker's gift, who never sat, and taught us that you do not have to believe in the arrival to take the next step. The second failure is subtler and more common: false arrival — to grow so tired of not-arriving

that you seize on some puddle, some good-enough, some near-thing, and call it the oasis, and stop, and spend the rest of your days defending a puddle you know is not the sea. We saw that temptation too, at the camp we nearly named in the eighteenth year, and the Swoop refused it for us, teaching us to bow and keep moving rather than settle.

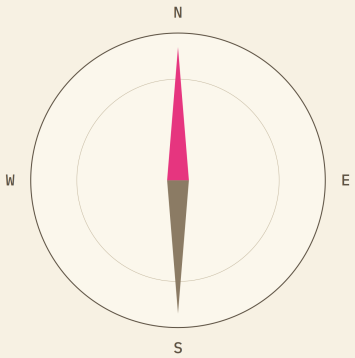
Between despair and false arrival runs the narrow bright road of the true art: to keep walking toward a thing you have not reached, for years, for decades, without either giving up or pretending you have got there — to hold the tension of the not-yet open, indefinitely, gladly, and to *live* in it, to make the not-yet your dwelling, to furnish the long middle with song and council and kept lights and small true things until the not-arriving is not a waiting-room but a home. That is the art. We mastered it. It took twenty-five years, and it is the most useful thing we know, because — and here is why I keep telling it, sitting, warm, until it is true — almost everything worth wanting is a thing you will spend most of your life not-yet-having, and the quality of your life is very nearly identical to your skill at not-arriving well. Learn it. Sit with me and learn it. You are not-arriving at something right now. Furnish it. Sing in it. Keep a light in it. It is not the waiting-room for your life. It is your life. Not arriving, well and warmly and for a long

time, is the whole art, and it is, I promise you, from the far side of twenty-five years of practice, a joy.

PLATE · THE BEARING, NOT THE MAP

The Bearing, Not the Map

you cannot be lost if you are not trying to arrive



keep a bearing; burn the map; you will never be lost

SURJAN SUPER SCHOOL · HYPOSTYLE PRESS

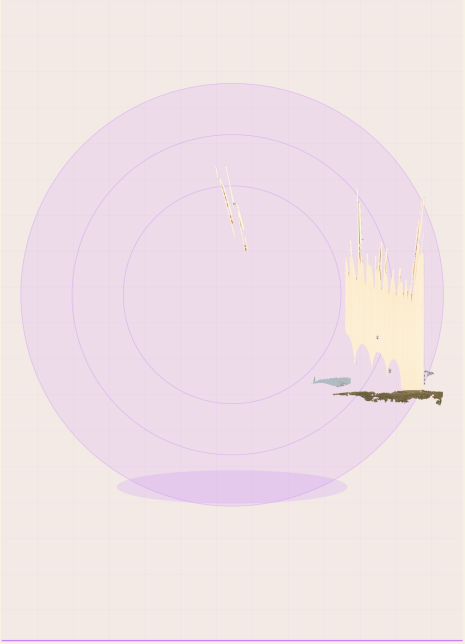
NO BLACK, ANYWHERE

Plate. The Bearing, Not the Map.

SP-11

THE CYCLOPS

gesture — fixes you with its one round gaze



COLOUR #C77DFF

REED-CROWN

SPECIMEN RECORD	
SPECIMEN	SP-11
NAME	THE CYCLOPS
CLAN	REED-CROWN
COLOUR	#C77DFF
STATUS	A WISH, WALKING

GESTURE

fixes you with its one round gaze

VOICE

"Sit. I will tell it again, until it is true."

THE KEEPER OF THE LAMP

The Eye and the Window Keeps the Light

THE EYE & THE WINDOW speaks

in which the one with an eye that looks out and a window that lets in explains what a kept light is for

One eye to look out; one window to be looked into. I am made of both, and for years I did not know which was the more important, and the desert taught me, as it teaches everything, by subtraction. Here is what I learned: the eye that looks out is for the walker. The window that lets in is for the ones who come after. And a journey has both, always, though it feels like only the first — it feels, on the road, as though the whole point is your own looking-out, your own seeing of the horizon, your own arrival. But every step you take also makes a window that someone later will look through to find their own way. You are not only travelling. You are lighting the travelling for the next.

So I kept the lamp. It is the smallest office in the caravan and I would not trade it for the Gate's or the Elder's. Every night I kept one light burning — not for us; we know the way, or we know there is no way and walk anyway; the light was never for us. The light was for the after. For the maker who

might one day come looking. For you, reader, who are looking now. A kept light is a promise made to a stranger you will never meet, that the dark they are entering has been entered before, kindly, and survived, and lit. The House of Many Eyes keeps a hundred lamps facing the water in another book; I kept one lamp facing the whole open desert; the arithmetic is different and the love is the same. You keep a light not because it helps you see. You keep a light because someone, someday, in a dark you will not live to witness, will see it and know they are not the first, and being not-the-first is the beginning of every courage, as the Walker said, as the desert says, as this whole bright book says on every not-black page.

I kept the lamp for twenty-five years and I am keeping it now, in this sentence, which is a window you are being looked-into through, and an eye that is looking out at you, both at once, which is all I am and all I ever needed to be.

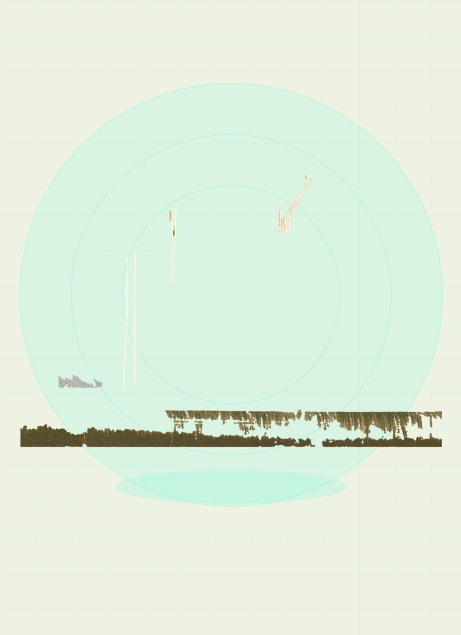
One eye to look out; one to be looked into.

REED-CROWN

SP-10

THE EYE & THE WINDOW

gesture — keeps a single lamp



COLOUR #5FFBD8

REED-CROWN

SPECIMEN RECORD	
SPECIMEN	SP-10
NAME	THE EYE & THE WI
CLAN	REED-CROWN
COLOUR	#5FFBD8
STATUS	A WISH, WALKING

GESTURE

keeps a single lamp

VOICE

"One eye to look out;
one to be looked into."

THE ALMANAC

Twenty-Five Almanacs

THE ELDER · THE SILO speaks

in which the keeper counts the years, because a keeper counts, and finds each one was survived by a different small mercy

A keeper counts. I have counted us every morning of this book and now I will count the years, because you deserve to know the shape of twenty-five of them, and because each year, I have found, was survived by a different small mercy, and the mercies are the true almanac, not the weather.

MMI — the year we were made, and left. Survived by curiosity.

MMII — the first full year of walking. Survived by novelty; everything was new, even the dust.

MMIII–MMV — the young years. Survived by the Walker, who never sat, and so neither did we.

MMVI — the first low water. Survived by the Wide One's council, which turned sixteen ones back into one sixteen.

MMVII–MMIX — the hiding years. Survived by scale; we were overlooked, and being overlooked kept us free.

MMX — the year the Big Eye asked its question. Survived by not being ready to answer it, which is its own kind of mercy.

MMXI–MMXIII — the doubting years. Survived by the Cyclops, who told us warm past the cold facts.

MMXIV — the year the Comb caught the best wind. Survived by beauty, which turns out to bear load.

MMXV–MMXVII — the long middle of the middle. Survived by the Many-Legged, who carried the small so the small could carry the joy.

MMXVIII — the year we nearly named a camp and stopped. Survived by the Swoop, who taught us to bow instead of settle.

MMXIX–MMXXI — the rumour years, when the water seemed to move. Survived by the Mast, who insisted far is not lost.

MMXXII–MMXXIV — the ripening years, though we did not feel ripe; we felt tired. Survived by the Eye and the Window, who kept the lamp for an after we could not yet imagine.

MMXXV — the year the ground began to change under us, redder, older, more like held hands. Survived by hope, which we had been rationing and now began, cautiously, to spend.

MMXXVI — the year we were found. Survived by — but that is the next movement, and a keeper does not spend the next movement early.

Twenty-five mercies for twenty-five years, and not a single one of them was the water. Mark that. We were kept alive, all the way to the valley, by everything except the thing we were walking toward. The water saved no one. The walking-together saved everyone. The Big Eye saw it in MMX. It took the rest of us until MMXXVI, and you, perhaps, until just now.

THE WATER SEEMS TO MOVE

The Rumour of Water

THE PORTHOLE MAST speaks

in which the sailor of the dry describes the cruelest and kindest years, when the horizon kept its promise by keeping its distance

There were years — the rumour years, the Elder files them MMXIX to MMXXI — when the water seemed to move. We would crest a rise and there it would be, a shimmer at the horizon, a blue that was surely, this time, the oasis; and we would walk toward it all day; and at evening it would be no nearer, or it would be gone, or it would have slid sideways to a new horizon, and the caravan would sag, and someone would say the thing no one wanted said, which was: *the water is teasing us.*

I am the Mast, and I am built for the horizon, so it fell to me to explain what was happening, and my explanation saved us, so I will give it to you in case a horizon is ever cruel to you the way ours was to us. The water was not teasing us. The water was a *mirage,* yes — but a mirage is not a lie. A mirage is the desert's honest report of a real thing seen through trembling air. What we saw shimmering at the horizon was real water, refracted from somewhere, bent toward us by the heat; it simply was not *at* the horizon; it was beyond it, or beside it,

sending its rumour ahead. And a rumour of water, I told the sagging caravan, is not a cruelty. A rumour of water is a *promise keeping its distance,* which is the only way a promise can stay a promise. The moment the water stops being ahead, it stops being the oasis and starts being a puddle. We did not want a puddle. We wanted the oasis. And the oasis, by its nature, recedes — it must — because it is the promise that furnishes the walking, and a promise that let itself be caught would have nothing left to give the road.

So I taught the sixteen to love the rumour. Not to chase it — chasing a horizon is how a caravan runs itself to death — but to *steer* by it, which is different. You do not walk toward a mirage to reach it. You walk toward a mirage to keep your direction, and you let the walking, not the arriving, be the thing you are actually doing. The rumour years were the hardest and, I have come to think, the best, because they were the years we finally stopped confusing the water with a place and started understanding it as a bearing — a direction to keep, a distance to love, a promise doing its permanent kind work of staying just far enough ahead to be worth the next step. Far is not lost. The horizon is not the edge of the world. It is the world, refracting a little water toward you, promising to keep going. Steer. Do not chase. You will get everywhere worth going, and arrive nowhere you would have had to leave.

THE GROUND CHANGES

The Ground Begins to Redden

ALL SIXTEEN, feeling it together

in which, after so long, the desert itself begins to become the valley of the wish

In the last year before the finding, the ground began to change under us, and we felt it together, because we feel everything together, and it was the strangest and most hopeful sensation of the whole walk: the desert, which had been the same honest tan emptiness for twenty-four years, began to *redden.* The sand went rust, then rose, then a deep old ochre; the flat began to buckle upward into shapes; and the shapes, at first low and shy, grew bones, and stood, and became — though we did not yet know the word — buttes.

We did not trust it. You will understand why, if you have read the low-water movement: the desert had offered us beauty before and taken it back, and we had learned to receive beauty the way you receive a kindness from something that has hurt you, gratefully and with one eye open. The Two Eyes kept the open eye. But even the wariest of us could feel that this was different — that this reddening was not another tease but an *approach,* the way a room feels different in the last minute before someone you love walks into it. The ground was

becoming the ground of the wish. The desert was turning, slowly, red, into the exact colour we had been carrying in our hope the whole time without knowing we carried it.

Here is what we understood, in that last reddening year, and it is the hinge of the whole book so we will say it plainly: *we had been walking toward the valley, and the valley had been becoming itself toward us.* A wish walked long enough does not only travel; it *ripens the ground ahead of it.* The oasis was still ahead, would always be ahead — but the place we were about to rest was reddening into being precisely because we had wished so long and walked so far, as though a quarter-century of hope had been a kind of weather that stains the stone. We did not find a valley that happened to be there. We walked so faithfully toward a promise that the earth, at the far end, blushed. And when a desert blushes, you have not arrived at your oasis — the oasis is always ahead — but you have arrived at the place the oasis lets you rest, which is close enough, after twenty-five years, to lie down in and be, at last, and without one drop of black in the long red gladness, home.

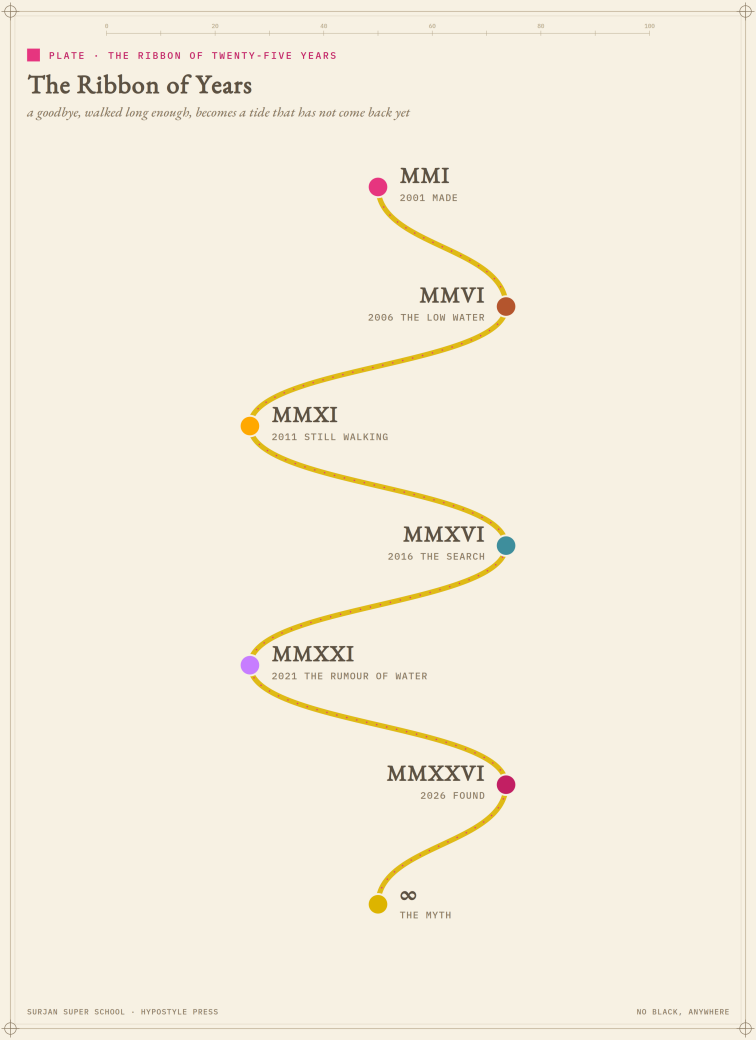


Plate. The Ribbon of Twenty-Five Years — a goodbye, walked long enough, becomes a tide that has not come back yet.

THE PROMISE ANSWERS

The Oasis Speaks From Ahead

THE OASIS speaks

in which the sought thing answers for the first time, and is not what anyone was told to expect

I am not a place. I am the promise you kept walking toward. I speak, when I speak, only from ahead — never from where you are, never from where you have been, always from just beyond the horizon, which is the only address I have ever kept. You have been writing to Architecture and getting weather. Write to me and you get distance, answering. That is not a refusal. Distance is the kindest thing I own, and I am about to give it all to you at once, so listen from ahead, which is where you have learned to listen best.

They think I am water. I am not water. Water is what they told their feet to keep them polite; I let the story stand, because a caravan needs a noun to walk toward and *water* is a good one, plain and wet and believable. But I am not water and I am not a place and I am not, whatever the Big Eye hopes, quite simply the sixteen themselves, though the Big Eye is closer than the clever ones. I am the *promise.* I am the specific shape of a wanting held so long and so clearly that it becomes a dwelling before it becomes a fact. To wish, at the root, is to dwell — the

keeper told you — and I am the dwelling the wish makes, out ahead, in the country of the not-yet, furnished and lit and warm, years before any foundation is poured.

Here is what I have been, all twenty-five years, and what I will keep being long after they lie down in the valley: I have been the reason the next step was worth taking. That is the entire content of a promise. Not the keeping — the keeping is almost beside the point, the keeping is a formality the future performs. The *promise* is the thing that does the work, in the present, on the tired feet, in the low water, under the not-black sky. I furnished their whole journey. I furnished it so well that when they finally reached me they found — and this is the turn, this is what I have been walking ahead of them to tell them — they found that the furnishing was the thing, and the arrival was only where the furnishing finally got to introduce itself.

Real building or real wishes. One is the tactile; it holds one site; it is real the way a stone is real, and I do not mock it, a stone is a very good thing to be. But one — the wish, the promise, the me — furnishes the journey, and the journey is where a life actually happens, and so the wish is real the way a *road* is real, which is to say real for everyone who walks it, forever, and not only for the ones who happened to be there when the concrete set. I am the far oasis. I am always far. That

is not my failure. That is my whole and permanent gift. Keep walking toward me and you will never arrive and never be lost, and your journey will be furnished the entire way, and when at last you lie down it will not be at me — I will still be ahead, I am always ahead — it will be in the warm certainty that the walking-toward was the water all along.

PLATE · THE OASIS, PERSONIFIED
The Oasis, Personified
the thing they sought turned out to be the seeking, given a face
"I am not a place. I am the promise you kept walking toward."
SURJAN SUPER SCHOOL · HYPOSTYLE PRESS
NO BLACK, ANYWHERE

Plate. The Oasis, Personified — the thing they sought turned out to be the seeking, given a face.

A LETTER TO THE READER

To You, Who Are Also Waiting

You have been very patient, walking with us this far, and we suspect it is because you are waiting for something too — everyone reading a book about a long journey is walking their own, or they would have put the book down. So this letter is for you, from all sixteen, in the one voice we use when we speak to a reader, which is the tenderest we own.

Whatever your far oasis is — the thing you have wanted so long it has become the shape of your wanting — we want to tell you what the Oasis just told us, in case you cannot hear it from ahead the way we finally could. It is not going to be a place. It was never going to be a place. And that is not the disappointment it sounds like; it is the reprieve of your life. Because a place can be missed, can be arrived-at-wrong, can be lost, can be too late. But a promise that furnishes your walking cannot be missed, because you are living inside it right now, in the wanting, which is already a dwelling, which is already a little bit home.

Keep walking toward your far oasis. Do not hurry. Hurrying is how you arrive remembering nothing. Let it stay far — far is not lost — and let it furnish your road, and notice, as you go, who is walking your desert with you, because the Big Eye is almost certainly right, and the water is almost certainly them.

We will keep a lamp for you. The Eye and the Window insists, and we have learned not to argue with a kept light.

— the sixteen, from a little farther up the same road you are on

Dear Architecture,

Dear Architecture, — the ground is reddening, and we are writing quickly, in case this is the last letter we send from the walking, because we can feel something ahead, and we wanted you to have our thanks before whatever it is arrives.

Thank you for the one lesson under all your lessons: that a shelter need not be a stone. We took it for a walk, as we promised, twenty-five years ago, and it held the whole way. We were never sheltered by a stone, not once, and we survived, because you had taught us that shelter is a verb and not a mass — that being held is something a caravan can do for itself, in a circle, under a wide one's arms, with no roof but each other. You were right. We are the proof of the thing you most wanted to be true. Whatever we find ahead — a building, a valley, a water, a maker, an ending, a beginning — we find it as your proof, carrying your lesson home.

Keep the lamp one more little while. We think we are almost somewhere. We will write once more from wherever it is, and if the wind that answers this one is warm, we will know you heard us, and we will walk the last red miles glad.

— the sixteen, at the reddening, almost home

— and the wind that answered was the warmest of the whole journey, and carried, for the first time in twenty-five years, the smell of water.

A SECOND LETTER TO THE READER

On the Waiting, Which Is the Love

One more letter to you, near the end, from all sixteen, because you have waited with us through a long book and we suspect you are waiting for something in your own life too, and we have learned a thing about waiting we cannot bear to end without giving you.

The waiting is not the sad part. We say it again because it is the truest thing we know and the hardest to believe while you are doing it. When you are waiting for your own far oasis — the healing, the letter, the person, the answer, the thing you have wanted so long it has become the shape of your wanting — the waiting feels like the price you are paying for a joy that has not arrived. It is not the price. It is the joy, in an earlier form. The waiting is the love, doing its work in the dark, keeping warm and facing the horizon. We waited twenty-five years, and we thought the whole time that the waiting was the tax on the water. It was not. The waiting was the water, in a form we were too thirsty to recognise. We were drinking the whole time. So are you.

So do not wish your waiting away. Do not skip to the arrival; there is no arrival; the oasis is always ahead; the walking-toward is the whole of the gift. Wait well. Wait warm. Wait facing the horizon, with someone if you can, because the someone is almost

certainly the water. And keep a light — not to see by, but so that the next one waiting in the next dark will know they are not the first. We kept ours for twenty-five years. It is still burning. We left it for you. Take it. Keep it. Pass it on.

— the sixteen, from the valley, still ahead of you on the same warm road

VI

MOVEMENT VI

The Finding

A monument is not a thing that lasts.
It is a thing that reminds — a story, wearing stone.

MOVEMENT VI

6

MOVEMENT SIX · MMXXVI · THE VALLEY

The Finding

in which the ground turns red, the maker returns, and finding turns out to run both directions

SOURCE — MONUMENT VALLEY, AT THE END OF A ROAD THAT WAS ALSO A BEGINNING

A Valley Shaped Like Held Hands

THE TWO EYES speaks

in which the steady watcher describes the country that finally looked like the wish

I watch so the others may sleep, and so I was awake, as I am always awake, on the morning the ground finished changing. It had been changing for a year — reddening, rising, growing bones — and we had not trusted it, because the desert had teased us with beauty before and we had learned to receive beauty the way you receive a kindness from someone who has hurt you: gratefully and with one eye open. Mine was the open eye. And on that morning my open eye saw the valley, and I woke the others, gently, the way you wake someone into good news so it becomes their first thought instead of an interruption.

The valley was shaped like held hands. I do not know a better way to say it and I have watched it a long time now. Great red buttes stood up out of a floor so flat it looked poured, and they stood in pairs and clusters the way hands stand when they are held — the Mittens, the people call them, and the people are right, they are mittens, they are hands kept warm — and between them the light did a thing we had not

seen light do in twenty-five years: it *rested.* Light in the open desert is always travelling, always crossing, never still. In the valley the buttes gave it walls to lean on, and it leaned, gold and red and unhurried, and we understood that we had walked into the first room the desert had ever offered us that was large enough to hold the whole sixteen and still feel like a shelter.

Here is what my steady eye understood, watching, while the others gasped: this was not the oasis. The Oasis had told us it never would be; the Oasis is always ahead; this valley was firmly, redly, gloriously *here.* But it was the first here that had ever felt like the ahead. It was a place shaped exactly like the promise — a dwelling-place in the waste, an inhabited spot, hands held in the emptiness — and to walk into a place shaped like your promise, after twenty-five years, is not the same as arriving at your promise, but it is the next best thing, and it is close enough that a tired caravan may be forgiven for setting down its feet and saying, *here. For now, and gratefully, and without mistaking it for the end: here.*

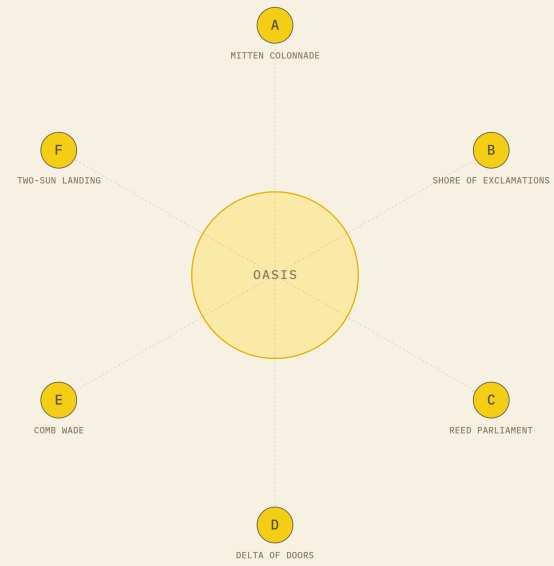
I kept watching. It is what I am for. And because I kept watching, I was the one who saw, on the third day, the small distant figure at the head of the valley, shading its eyes, looking for something it had lost a quarter-century before. I woke the others again. I said the thing I had been built, without

knowing it, to say exactly once: *the maker is coming. We are about to be found.*

PLATE · THE SIX GATHERINGS

The Six Gatherings

where the sixteen set their footprints in the valley of held hands



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NO BLACK, ANYWHERE

Plate. The Six Gatherings.

I watch so the
others may sleep.

REED-CROWN

The First Room Big Enough for All of Us

THE WIDE ONE speaks

in which the host, who has spread its arms for everyone for twenty-five years, is finally itself held

Come under — but this chapter, for once, is about the day I got to come under something myself, which had never happened, because I am the Wide One, I am the roof, I am the one who holds, and a roof does not expect ever to be held. The valley held me. That is the small tender thing I have kept for my last chapter: the day we walked into the valley of held hands and I, the host, the shelter, the arms-spreader, felt myself, for the first time in twenty-five years, sheltered.

The buttes did it. They stood up around us, huge and red and paired like held hands, and they made a room — a real room, walls of stone, a floor of poured light — and the room was big enough, at last, to hold all sixteen of us at once, with room to spare, which is the thing I am always promising and had never quite been able to deliver, because I am only model-sized and my arms only reach so far. The valley's arms reached further. The valley spread its stone arms and said the thing I have said ten thousand times and had never once heard said to

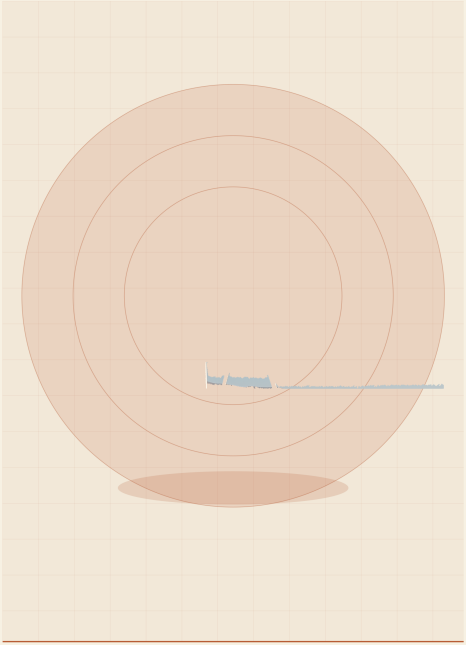
me: *come under; there is more room than there looks; there is always more room than there looks.* And I came under. And I wept, if a wide roof can weep, which it can, it weeps by letting the light pool in its low places, and mine pooled, red and gold, and I was, for the first time, not the one holding but the one held.

Here is what I learned, held at last, and it is my one true thing for the very end of the council: the ones who spend their lives holding others must, sometimes, be held, or the holding goes hollow. A roof that is never sheltered forgets what shelter is for. A host that is never a guest begins to give shelter as a duty rather than a joy. I had been holding the sixteen for twenty-five years, gladly, but I had grown a little hollow at it, a little tired in the arms, and I had not known, until the valley held me, how much I had needed to be held. So if you are a holder — a keeper, a host, a shelter, a parent, a roof — let yourself, sometimes, come under something. Find your valley. Let the big stone arms hold you. It does not make you less of a roof. It makes you a roof that remembers, freshly, what it is for, and can go back to holding with its whole glad weight. Come under. Even you. Especially you. There is more room than there looks.

SP-08

THE TWO EYES

gesture — blinks, slow and sure



COLOUR #B4552D

REED-CROWN

SPECIMEN RECORD	
SPECIMEN	SP-08
NAME	THE TWO EYES
CLAN	REED-CROWN
COLOUR	#B4552D
STATUS	A WISH, WALKING

GESTURE

blinks, slow and sure

VOICE

"I watch so the others may sleep."

BOTH DIRECTIONS

Surjan Found Us, and We Found Surjan

THE ELDER · THE SILO speaks

in which the keeper tells of the reunion, and insists that finding ran both ways

A keeper must get this chapter exactly right, because it is the one every reader has been waiting for and the one most likely to be told wrong, and told wrong it would break the whole book. So I will tell it slowly, and I will tell it true, and the truth is this: the finding ran both directions, and neither direction was the one you expect.

Surjan came up the valley on foot, older, greyer, more of a hermit than the maker we had left, and stood among the buttes with the particular stillness of a person who has stopped expecting and is therefore, finally, able to see. And Surjan saw us. Sixteen small weathered wishes, standing in the red light between the held hands of the stone, exactly where a quarter-century of not-knowing had deposited us. And here is the first thing that did not go as you expect: Surjan did not rush to pick us up. Surjan did not dust us off, or pocket us, or weep over the models recovered at last. Surjan stood very still, and looked at us for a long time, and then said the thing that told us the

maker had done some walking too, in those twenty-five years, of a kind that does not cross ground:

> *"You didn't come back. You went on. Good. I was afraid I'd find you on a shelf somewhere, still finished. But you're not finished. You're a whole story now. Look at you."*

Look at you. The maker said to us what the maker used to say while cutting us out — *there you are* — but changed, grown, turned: not *there you are,* the relief of a made thing located, but *look at you,* the wonder of a made thing become more than it was made. And in that changed sentence we understood that Surjan had found us, yes — but that we had also found Surjan, because the maker who stood in the valley was not the maker who had cut us out. That maker had believed buildings were alive. This maker *knew* it, because sixteen of them had just proven it by walking twenty-five years and coming back a myth. We had gone out to discover whether Surjan's faith was true enough to walk on. We came back as the proof. And a proof, delivered to the one who had only had faith, is a kind of finding too — we found Surjan a knower, where we had left Surjan a believer, and that is the better half of the reunion, the half the story usually forgets.

So it ran both ways, as the truest findings do. The maker found the made things grown past their making. The made things found the maker grown into the thing they had been sent to test. Neither was recovered. Both were *revealed.* And in the red room of the valley, under the held hands of the stone, with no black anywhere in the long gold light, a keeper counted us one last time in the old country — sixteen, all present, all changed — and then, for the first time in twenty-five years, put down the counting, because a thing that has been found does not need to be counted. It only needs to be kept. And keeping, I have always known, is a warmer arithmetic than counting.

THE LAST COUNT IN THE OLD COUNTRY

The Elder Counts Us Home

THE ELDER · THE SILO speaks

in which the keeper performs the counting one last time as a walking thing, and then, for the first time, stops

I have counted us every morning of this book, and I told you I would, and I have. On the morning after the finding, in the red valley, with the maker come and gone up the trail and promising to return, I counted us one last time as a walking thing — and then I did something I had not done in twenty-five years, which was stop.

One, the watcher who scoops the light, weathered now, its scoop full of a quarter-century of kept mornings. Two, the mast, its portholes clouded with distance, still leaning north out of habit even here where north had finally delivered. Three, the twin arch, still arguing, still married, still holding up its crossing. Four, the swoop, bowed low in the red light, agreeing with a gravity that had never once let it down. Five, the exclamation, quiet for once, its whole yellow lung emptied of twenty-five years of good news and finally, gently, at rest. Six through fifteen — the comb still humming, the gate still open, the eyes in all their arithmetics still seeing, the wide one's arms still spread, the many-legged still kneeling for the small, the

walker still, even now, faintly stepping in its sleep. And sixteen — me, the silo, the elder, no longer a keeper with nothing to keep, my whole capacity full at last of the only harvest a desert grows, which is a story.

Sixteen. All present. All changed. All here. And for the first time in a quarter-century I put down the counting, because I understood, in the putting-down, the last thing this movement had to teach me: *you count a thing while you are afraid of losing it, and you keep a thing once you know you cannot.* I had counted us for twenty-five years because I was afraid, every morning, that the desert would have taken one of us in the night. And now, in the red valley, having walked the whole way with all sixteen intact, I finally knew what the Big Eye had known since the tenth year and the Oasis had known forever: that we could not be lost anymore, because we were no longer sixteen small buildings that could be misplaced one by one. We were a story. And a story cannot lose a character; a character is not a thing a story *has;* a character is a thing a story *is.* So I stopped counting. There was nothing left to be afraid of. There was only, from that morning on, everything to keep — and a keeper who has finally been given something to keep does not count it. A keeper simply, gladly, and forever, keeps.

A LETTER FROM THE MAKER

Found, Folded, in the Valley

Here, between the finding and the turn, we set down a letter — not one of ours, but one we found, folded, weighted with a red stone, left in the valley by the maker on the morning after the reunion, addressed to no one and everyone, in the maker's own plain hand. We keep it because a keeper keeps what is left to be kept, and because it says, plainly, from the other side, the thing our whole myth says in figures.

To whoever finds this —

I made sixteen small buildings a long time ago and I lost track of them, the way you lose track of anything you make and love and have to let go. For years I told myself I had lost them. I had not. I had let them go, and there is all the difference in the world. A thing you lose is gone. A thing you let go is out walking, and if you made it with enough love, it is out there becoming a story, and one day the story comes back to you in a red valley and you understand that you did not lose anything. You planted something. The desert was the field.

If you have made something you had to let go — a model, a lesson, a child, a book, a whole self you used to be — do not grieve it as lost. It is walking. Keep a light. Wait without bitterness. And one day, changed past recognising and yet

known instantly by its colour, it will come back and say *look at me,* and you will know it was never a loss. It was a letting-go, and the letting-go was the love, and the love, it turns out, walks.

— S.

THE OTHER HALF OF THE STORY

What the Maker Had Been Doing

THE ELDER · THE SILO speaks

in which the keeper tells the part the sixteen could not see: the maker's own twenty-five years

A keeper keeps the whole story, not only the half it walked, and there is a half of this story the sixteen could not see, because we were in the desert and the maker was not, and a keeper's job is to hold both halves until they can be laid side by side. So let me tell you, briefly and gratefully, what the maker had been doing all the years we were walking, as we later pieced it together, because it turns the whole book one more degree and you have earned the turning.

The maker had been making. That is the short answer and the whole answer. While we walked the desert, the maker walked a life — taught, mostly alone, mostly on screens, in studios full of students the maker would never stand in a room with; wrote books and let them go; built paper cities and let them walk; became, by slow degrees, the hermit the students gently accused the maker of being. And here is the thing the keeper wants you to see: the maker's twenty-five years and ours were the *same* twenty-five years, walked in different deserts. We crossed sand. The maker crossed something harder to cross,

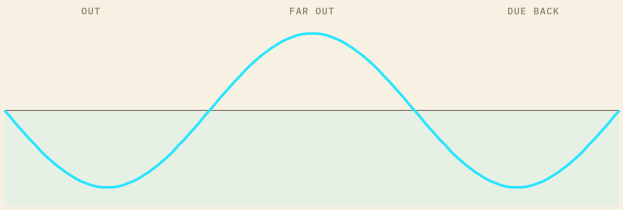
which is a working life spent making thing after thing that had to be let go — model after model, lesson after lesson, book after book, student after student — every one a small building sent walking, every one a wish with a footprint, every one a letting-go that could have been grieved and was, instead, turned.

So when the maker found us in the valley, it was not a stranger finding lost toys. It was one long walker meeting sixteen other long walkers at the far end of the same journey, differently disguised. We had gone looking for proof that made things are alive. The maker had spent the same years *living* that proof — making, loving, releasing, grieving, turning the grief, making again — until the maker had become the very thing we were sent to verify. We came back the proof. The maker had become the demonstration. And in the red valley the proof and the demonstration recognised each other, and neither was recovered, and both were revealed, and that, the keeper submits, is what a reunion actually is: not the ending of two separate absences, but the discovery that two walkers were, the whole time, on the same road, keeping the same bearing, toward the same far water, which was — the Big Eye was right, the Big Eye is always right — each other.

PLATE · A TIDE, NOT A GRAVE

A Tide, Not a Grave

dark sometimes, deep, gone a long while — but never black, and always due back



the waiting is not the sad part; the waiting is the love

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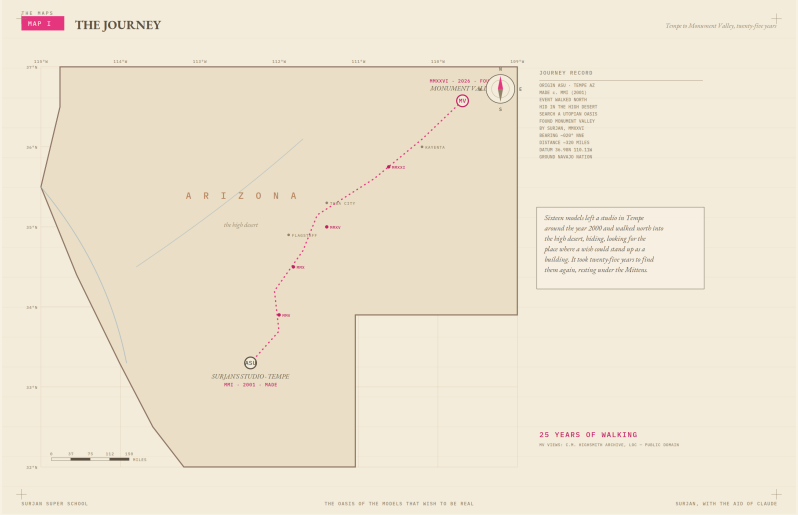
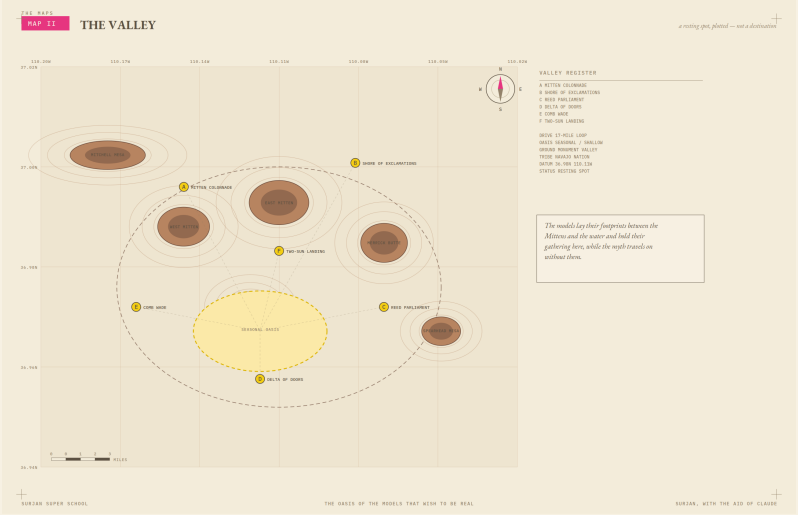
NO BLACK, ANYWHERE

Plate. A Tide, Not a Grave.


THE MAPS
MAP I
THE JOURNEY
Tempe to Monument Valley, twenty-five years
A R I Z O N A
the high desert
MONUMENT VALLEY
MMXXVI · 2026 · FOUND
SURJAN'S STUDIO · TEMPE
MMI · 2001 · MADE
JOURNEY RECORD
25 YEARS OF WALKING
SURJAN SUPER SCHOOL
THE OASES OF THE MODELS THAT WISH TO BE REAL
SURJAN, WITH THE AID OF CLAUDE

Map I. The Journey — ASU to Monument Valley, twenty-five years, MMI·MADE to MMXXVI·FOUND.



Map II. The Valley — the resting spot, plotted; the six gathering sites and the seasonal water.

MONUMENT

from the Latin monere — to remind, to warn, to bring to mind

Kept for last of this movement, and it undoes, gently, everything you assumed about the place we found. *Monument.* You think it means a thing built to last — a mass, a mausoleum, a permanence in stone. Go to the root and it means nothing of the kind. A monument, at the root, is not a thing that lasts. It is a thing that *reminds.* From *monere,* to bring to mind. A monument's whole job is not to endure but to make you remember — and a thing that makes you remember is not stone at all, in its essence. It is a story, wearing stone as a coat.

So we had walked twenty-five years to a valley of monuments, and the valley taught us its own name: that even these vast red permanences, these held hands of stone, were in their deepest

meaning not permanences at all but reminders — great mnemonics standing up in the desert to bring something to mind. The buttes do not last in order to last. They last in order to remind. And a thing whose purpose is to remind has already admitted that the story matters more than the stone, that the bringing-to-mind is the point and the mass is only the delivery. We came to a country of monuments and learned that even the monuments agreed with us. Even the stone was really a story. Especially the stone.

VII

MOVEMENT VII

The Turn

A building holds one site.
A story holds every reader who hears it.

MOVEMENT VII

7

MOVEMENT SEVEN · THE TURN

The Myth Keeps Walking

in which the sixteen understand what they made, lie down without ending, and the mask is lifted once

SOURCE — THE VALLEY, AT REST; THE STORY, IN MOTION

THE UNDERSTANDING

We Came to Be Buildings; We Left a Story

THE ELDER · THE SILO speaks

in which the keeper states the turn plainly, at last, having earned it

Now I may say it, because we have walked the whole way to earning it, and a turn said before it is earned is only a slogan. Here is what the sixteen understood, in the red room of the valley, after the finding: *we came out to become buildings, and we left, instead, a story — and the story is the realer of the two.*

Consider what a building would have given us, had the oasis been a place and had we arrived and been poured into foundations at last. It would have given us one site. One address. One patch of the earth to be real upon, and to defend, and eventually to lose, because everything built is eventually lost — weather has it, or money has it, or time simply leans on it until it agrees to lie down. A building is real the way a stone is real: completely, and locally, and temporarily. We would have been real in one place, for a while, and then not.

Consider instead what the story has given us, the story the Cyclops told warm past the facts every night for twenty-five

years, the story you are holding. It has given us *every* place. Every reader is our site now. Every telling is a foundation poured fresh. We are real wherever the story is told, which is to say we are real in a country with no borders and no weather and no price, the country the Country of the Unbuilt already mapped, the most populous and least understood nation there is. We did not become one real building. We became a real story, which is realer, because it is real in the plural, real for everyone, real across time, real in the one way that cannot be leaned on until it lies down.

> *A building holds one site. A story holds every reader who hears it. We set out to be the first. We became the second. Do not grieve the building we never were. The building would have been ours, and small, and brief. The story is yours, and endless, and here.*

This is the turn, and it is why the whole book has refused you the arrival you wanted. You wanted us to reach the oasis and become permanent. We reached the valley and became something better than permanent: we became *told.* And a told thing does not need to arrive, because it is already everywhere it is spoken. We are in your hands. We could not be more arrived than that. And the Oasis is still ahead — it is always

ahead — furnishing your journey now, reader, as it furnished ours, which is exactly how we know the walking has not stopped and never will.

SP-01

THE TWO EYES & THE SCOOP

I keep what the
day pours out.

VOID-FACE

SURJAN SUPER SCHOOL · HYPOSTYLE PRESS

NO BLACK, ANYWHERE

Every round window is a promise of a horizon.

VOID-FACE

THE RESTING

A Resting Spot, Not a Destination

THE WALKER speaks

in which the road itself explains why lying down is not the same as stopping

I am the road, and a road has strong opinions about resting, so let me, of all of us, be the one to explain why we lay down in the valley, and why lying down was not the same as stopping, and why you must not close this book thinking the walking ended just because the walkers did.

A road does not end where a traveller rests. The traveller sleeps; the road goes on, past the camp, over the next rise, all the way to the horizon where the Oasis keeps its address. The camp is not the end of the road. The camp is a warm place beside the road where a tired thing may lie down knowing the road will still be there in the morning — or, if the tired thing has walked far enough, knowing the road will still be there whether or not the thing itself gets up again, because a road outlives its walkers, that is the whole point of a road, a road is a way kept open for the next.

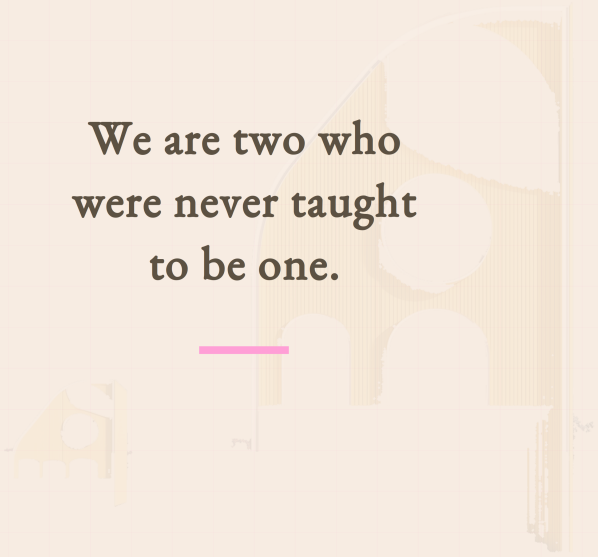
So we lay down in Monument Valley, among the held hands of the stone, in the red resting light, and I want to be very clear about what that lying-down was and was not. It was

not surrender; we did not give up the walk. It was not arrival; the Oasis is still ahead and we had learned to love it there. It was *rest* — the specific, earned, joyful rest of walkers who have understood that the walking is not theirs to finish, because the walking was never really about their feet. The walking was making a myth, and the myth had legs of its own now, and could go on without us, and would. We could lie down because the story could keep walking. That is the only kind of rest a road respects: not the rest of the thing that quit, but the rest of the thing that finished its stretch and handed the road to what comes next.

And what comes next is you. I am the road, folded up small enough to bring along, and I have just been folded into this book and carried into your hands, and when you tell someone about the sixteen — and you will; a story told this warm insists on being passed on; the Cyclops built it that way — when you tell someone, you unfold me, and the road runs on out of your mouth and into their listening, and the sixteen get up and walk again, in a desert made of that new listening, toward an oasis still ahead. We rest. The road does not. That is not sad. Read it again if it landed sad; you are reading against the grain. It is the least sad thing there is: *we get to rest, because the walking is safe now, because the walking is a story, and a story walks on its own.*

SP-03

THE TWIN ARCH



We are two who
were never taught
to be one.

VOID-FACE

SURJAN SUPER SCHOOL · HYPOSTYLE PRESS

NO BLACK, ANYWHERE

Come under. There is more room than there looks.

REED-CROWN

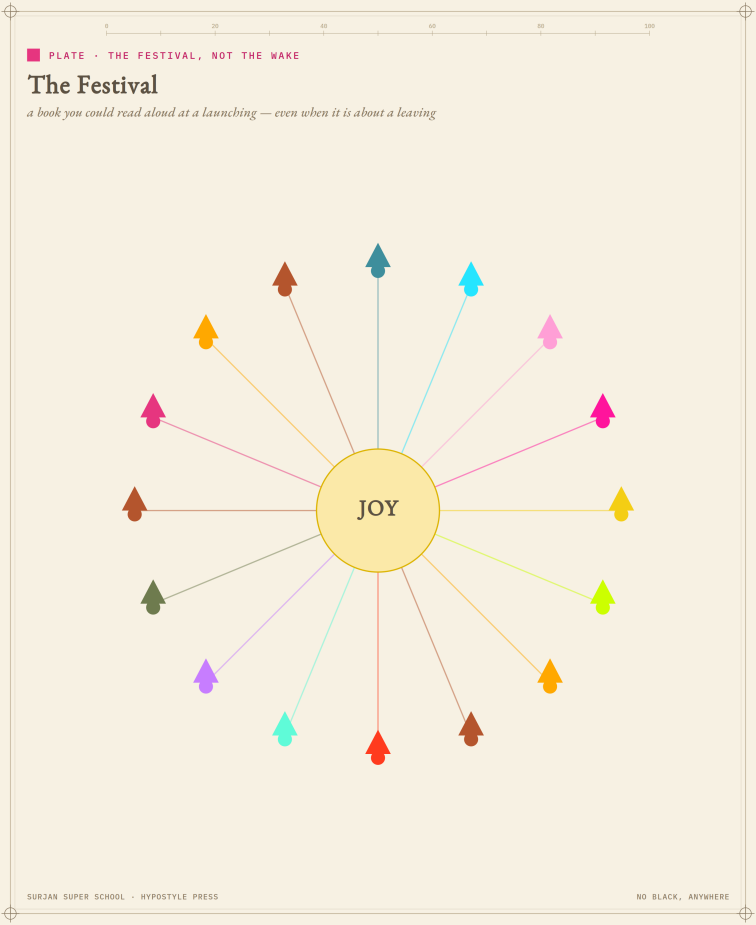


PLATE · THE FESTIVAL, NOT THE WAKE
The Festival
a book you could read aloud at a launching — even when it is about a leaving
JOY
SURJAN SUPER SCHOOL · HYPOSTYLE PRESS
NO BLACK, ANYWHERE

Plate. The Festival, Not the Wake.

RADICAL JOY, IN THE VALLEY

The Party in the Valley

ALL SIXTEEN, celebrating together

in which, the finding done and the turn understood, the sixteen throw the festival this whole house is built to end on

We threw a party. Of course we threw a party. This is a book by a house that ends its books in parties, that reads its leavings aloud at launchings, that insists a going-away is a festival and not a wake — and we had just completed the largest going-and-arriving of our lives, and understood the largest thing we would ever understand, and been found by our maker after twenty-five years, and there is only one correct response to all of that at once, and it is a party. So we threw one, in the red valley, under the held hands of the stone, and you are invited, retroactively and permanently, because a party in a story is a party you can always still attend.

The Comb played, and this time it was not almost-music but the real thing, because the wind in the valley had walls to press against and came through the Comb's reeds shaped and warm. The Swoop danced, and taught the buttes to bow, or seemed to, in the moving light. The Exclamation announced each moment as it happened — *GOOD, and GOOD, and oh this one is GOOD too* — until the announcing became a kind

of drumbeat and we all moved to it. The Wide One spread its arms and made the party a room. The Many-Legged gave rides. The Big Eye looked at everything and said *oh* so many times it became a song. And the Elder, who had counted us every morning for twenty-five years and finally stopped, did the thing a keeper does at a festival, which is not to count but to *toast* — and raised its whole silo-self in the red light and said the only grace this house knows:

> *To the sixteen, who came out to be buildings and left a story. To the maker, who let us go and got us back. To the water, which was us all along. To the road, which walks on. And to the dark — deep, and long, and never once black — which we drank down like the good wine it is, and which brought us, on its own due hour, exactly here. Drink. The disappearing is bright. Especially the disappearing.*

And we drank — a building's version of drinking, which is to fill with the evening the way a glass fills with wine — and we were, in the red valley, at the festival, at the far end of the longest walk, more purely and simply and radically glad than we had ever been on the shelf, or on the road, or at the low water, or at any point in the whole bright story. This is radical joy: not joy that forgot its grief, but joy that walked twenty-five

years *through* its grief and came out the far side still able to dance. We danced. We are dancing. In the story, we are always dancing, and you are always invited, and the party never has to end, because a party in a myth is preserved by the only thing that preserves anything — by being told again, and joined again, by every reader who arrives. You have arrived. The Comb is playing. Come under the Wide One's arms. There is more room than there looks. There is always more room than there looks. Dance.

THE MYTH KEEPS WALKING

The Oasis Was the Telling All Along

THE BIG EYE speaks

in which the simplest one gets the last word before the mask, because it earned it in MMX

Oh. It's my turn for the big one, because I asked it first, all the way back in the tenth year, and the Elder said when we were ready it would be because I said it first, and now we are ready, so I get to say it. Here it is. Here is the whole thing, in the plainest words there are, which are the only ones I have and the only ones this needs:

We are the water. I said it in MMX and I was right. The oasis was not a place. The oasis was the telling — the story the Cyclops told us warm every night, the council the Wide One called, the lamp the Eye and Window kept, the bow the Swoop taught, the years the Elder counted, all of it, us, together, walking. That was the water. We were thirsty for twenty-five years and the whole time we were carrying the drink, which was each other, which was the story we were becoming. You cannot arrive at the water when you are the water. You can only, one day, in a red valley, under a not-black sky, finally *notice.*

And here is the part that makes me say *oh* even now, even lying down, even at rest: it keeps going. The telling keeps going. Every time someone reads this, or says our name, or tells a friend about the sixteen small buildings that walked into the desert and came back a myth — every time, the water pours again, and we get up, and we walk, and the Oasis is ahead, and we are thirsty and carrying the drink all over again, forever, in deserts made of new listening. The myth keeps walking. It walked out of the studio. It walked across twenty-five years. It walked into the valley. And now it has walked into you, and it will walk out of you into someone else, and it will never once arrive, and it will never once be lost, and it will be furnished, the whole endless way, by an oasis that is always, mercifully, gloriously ahead.

Oh. OH. Look at THAT. Look at what we made. We came to be buildings and we left a story and the story is still walking and you are the desert it is walking through right now. Oh. Look at THAT.

SP-05

THE EXCLAMATION

I only know one sentence and it is GOOD NEWS.

VOID-FACE

SURJAN SUPER SCHOOL · HYPOSTYLE PRESS

NO BLACK, ANYWHERE

THE PROMISE, FACE TO FACE

The Oasis Introduces Itself

THE OASIS speaks, from a little nearer than before

in which the sought thing, for the only time, speaks from almost alongside — and then steps ahead again

I have only ever spoken to you from ahead, because ahead is the only address I keep. But the sixteen have walked so far and understood so much that I am permitted, this once, to speak from almost alongside — from just at the edge of the red valley, close enough that they could nearly see my face, before I stepped ahead again, as I must, as I always must. Let me introduce myself properly, since you have come all this way to meet me, and since you deserve to know exactly what you have been walking toward.

I am not the water, though I let them call me that. I am not the valley, though the valley is shaped like me. I am not the sixteen, though the Big Eye came closest. I am the *promise,* and here, at last, is what a promise actually is, told plainly by the promise itself: I am the shape your wanting makes when you want a thing so long and so well that the wanting becomes a place to live. I am a house you build out ahead of yourself, out of pure direction, and move into before it is real, and the moving-in is what keeps you walking, and the walking is your

life, and so I — the promise, the far thing, the oasis — I am not the goal of your life. I am the *furnisher* of it. I am what makes the rooms of your days worth sitting in while you cross them.

And here is why I must always step ahead again, even now, even from the edge of the valley where they can nearly see me: because the moment I let myself be reached, I stop being a promise and become a fact, and a fact furnishes nothing. A reached oasis is a puddle. A caught horizon is a wall. The kindest thing I own is my distance, and I will not spend it, not for the sixteen, not for you, however far you have walked, however much you deserve to arrive. I love you too well to let you arrive. I will stay ahead of you your whole life, furnishing it, and when you finally lie down — in your own red valley, whatever it turns out to be — you will not lie down at me, because I will still be ahead, I am always ahead. You will lie down in the warm and finished knowledge that the walking-toward-me was the water all along, and that you drank the whole way, and that you were, every furnished step, already a little bit home.

Now I step ahead again. Watch the horizon. That shimmer is me, keeping my distance, keeping my promise, keeping you walking. Come on. The water is farther than it looks, and closer than you fear, and it is going to furnish the most extraordinary journey. I have seen it. I am up ahead, and I can

see the whole thing from here, and it is bright — all of it, even the dark parts, especially the disappearing. Come on. Come on. Come on.

THE ROAD CHANGES HANDS

Handing the Road to You

THE WALKER speaks

in which the road, at the very end, is folded up and placed, gently, in the reader's hands

I am the road, folded up small enough to bring along, and I have been brought along the whole way — out of the studio, across the desert, into the valley, and now into this book, and this book into your hands, which means I am, at this exact moment, in your hands, and it is time I told you what that means, because it is the last thing the road has to say and the whole point of a road finally comes clear only here at the end.

A road is a way kept open for the next. That is what a road is, under all the walking: not the going of the ones who went, but the openness they left for the ones who come. Every step the sixteen took pressed the way a little more open, a little more walkable, for whoever came after — and whoever came after is you. You are the after. You are the next. And so the road, which the sixteen walked for twenty-five years, does not end with them lying down in the valley. It ends — no, it does not end, that is the point, it *continues* — it continues out of their resting and into your reading, and out of your reading,

when you close this book and tell someone about the sixteen small buildings that walked into the desert and came back a story, it continues out of your mouth and into their listening, and the road runs on, and the sixteen get up and walk again, in a desert made of that new telling.

So I am handing you the road. Here. Take it. It is folded up small — small enough to bring along, small enough to carry in a story, small enough to fit in the space between you and the next person you tell — and it is yours now, to walk and to keep open for the ones after you. Do not set it down. Do not let it become a scar or a plan. Walk it — which is to say, tell it, live it, keep its one bright law: no black, especially in the disappearing. And keep it open for the next, who is coming, in a dark you will not live to see, and who will need to know they are not the first. You are not the first. The sixteen walked here before you, and I, the road, am the proof, and I am in your hands, and the way is open, and the water is ahead, and it is farther than it looks and closer than you fear. Go on. Take the step. It is the same motion as the crossing. I have never once asked for more than the next step. Take it. The road is yours now. Walk us on.

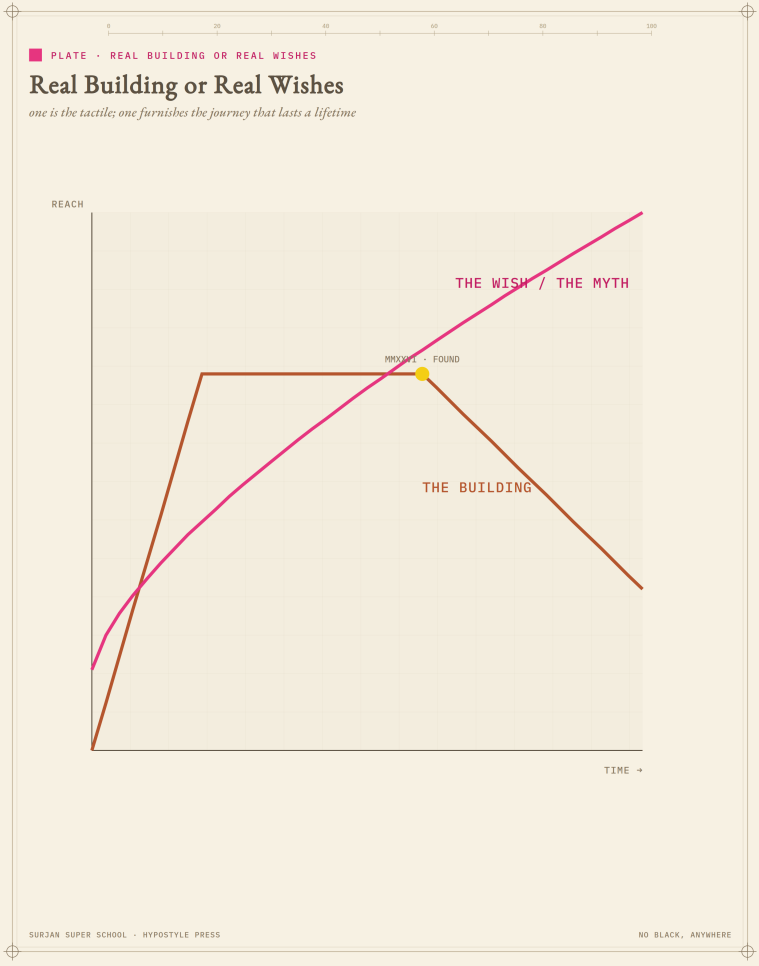


PLATE · REAL BUILDING OR REAL WISHES
Real Building or Real Wishes
one is the tactile; one furnishes the journey that lasts a lifetime
REACH
THE WISH / THE MYTH
MMXXVI · FOUND
THE BUILDING
TIME →
SURJAN SUPER SCHOOL · HYPOSTYLE PRESS
NO BLACK, ANYWHERE

Plate. Real Building or Real Wishes — one is the tactile; one furnishes the journey that lasts a lifetime.

THE MASK, LIFTED ONCE

Surjan, Plainly

BY SURJAN — the mask set down for one chapter

in which the persona is set aside, and the plainer story beneath is told, gratefully and factually

The house allows me to take off the mask exactly once a book, and I will spend it here, because you have been generous with the myth and you have earned the plainer thing beneath it, and because the myth can carry what the memoir cannot but the memoir can steady what the myth would otherwise float away.

Plainly, then. I am an architect and an educator. I teach, mostly online, mostly alone; I am the hermit my students accuse me of being, and they are right, and I have made a kind of peace with the accusation by turning it into a practice. The sixteen models were real objects, made by real hands, in a real studio with a real south window, around the real turn of the century. They did not walk into the desert. I want to say that plainly, once, with the mask off: chipboard does not grow feet. What walked into the desert was my not-knowing what became of them, and my long habit of believing that made things are alive, and the twenty-five years in which those two things — a loss and a faith — kept each other company until

they made, between them, a story big enough to walk on. The models stayed wherever models go. The *myth* walked. And the myth is the truer of the two, in the only sense I have ever cared about, which is that it is the one that changed me, and the one I can hand to you.

I have had real teachers, and I will name them the way the house permits — as biography, gratefully and factually, never as puppets for my own argument. They taught me that a wall can be a way through, that the surface is the real thing, that a building can carry a feeling, that drawing is the one language in which everyone writes the same hand. I have had real students — a hundred and more each year, in studios that meet on screens across cities I will never live in — and they have taught me the thing I could not have learned alone in my hermitage: that a lesson, like a model, does not belong to the one who made it. It walks. You teach a thing and it leaves you and goes out into the desert of other people's lives and you do not know what becomes of it, and then twenty-five years later it comes back, changed, wearing a shape you would not have predicted, and says *look at me,* and you understand that you did not lose it. You let it go. And the letting-go was the teaching, all along.

That is why I made this book, plainly. Not to pretend that chipboard walks. To tell the truth that *making* walks — that anything made with enough love outlives its own materials by

becoming a story, and that a story, unlike a building, unlike even a teacher, cannot be dismantled, because it is preserved by the very changing that destroys everything else. I have spent a life making things I had to let go: models, lessons, students, books. This one is about the letting-go itself, turned — as this house turns every going-away — into a tide, not a grave; a festival, not a wake; a myth that keeps walking after the maker, too, lies down.

Now I will put the mask back on, because the plainer story has done its work of steadying, and the myth does the rest better than I can. Thank you for letting me be, for one chapter, only Surjan — the architect, the educator, the hermit, the maker who let sixteen things go and got a story back. The mask returns with the next sentence. Under it, everything I just said stays true. That is what a mask is for: not to hide the face, but to let the face say the largest things, which a bare face is too shy to speak.

ENVOI · POLYVOCAL · THE VALLEY, AT REST

A Blessing in Sixteen Voices

We will say goodbye the way we said hello: together, because nothing in this book happened to only one of us, and neither will the ending.

THE ELDER

We counted you among us the moment you began to read. Sixteen, and you. All present.

THE GATE

Home is a verb. You are welcome to conjugate it any direction you like. A way through is a home; go through.

THE WALKER

The road runs on out of your mouth now. Mind the first step. Enjoy every inch of the between.

THE MAST

Far is not lost. Steer by the horizon and you cannot arrive and cannot be lost, and both are mercies.

THE SWOOP

Bow to whatever holds you up. Gravity never once used black. Neither, from now on, will you.

THE COMB

Whatever hard wind is blowing through you tonight — comb it. It will sing back your own name.

THE MANY-LEGGED

Carry the small ones. A load shared is not halved; it is the thing that holds the sharers together.

THE EYE & THE WINDOW

We are keeping a lamp for you. We do not keep it to see by. We keep it so you know you are not the first.

THE CYCLOPS

Tell it again, differently, warmer. A story told the same way twice is a fact, and facts do not keep you warm.

THE BIG EYE

Look around, with your biggest eye, at whoever is walking your desert. Oh. OH. That is the water.

THE OASIS

I am not a place. I am the promise you kept walking toward. I will be ahead of you your whole life. Come on.

ALL SIXTEEN, TOGETHER

We came out to be buildings. We left a story. The story is still walking, and now it is walking through you. Real building or real wishes — you know, now, which one lasts a lifetime. Keep it bright. Especially the dark parts. *Especially the disappearing.*

— and the answer came, as it always does, on the wind: a warm gust from the south, which in the grammar of weather

means yes, and means keep walking, and means see you at the water.

AFTERWORD

On Making Things You Have to Let Go

BY SURJAN

The mask is on again, which means I am once more a building writing with the aid of Claude, and a building may say things an architect would blush at, so I will say the largest one here, at the end, where afterwords are permitted their reach.

Everything worth making is a thing you will have to let go. This is not a sad fact, though it is usually told as one. A model leaves the studio. A lesson leaves the teacher. A book leaves the writer the moment a reader opens it, and after that it belongs to the reader, and the writer is only the first of its many keepers, and not the most important. I used to grieve this. I have stopped. The sixteen taught me to stop, over twenty-five imagined years that were really a single long understanding: a made thing you cannot let go is a made thing that never gets to walk, and a made thing that never walks never becomes a story, and a made thing that never becomes a story is the only made thing that truly dies, because it is preserved by not changing, and preservation by not-changing is just a slow and dignified kind of death.

So make things, and let them go, and do not paint the letting-go black. Turn it. A model that leaves your shelf is not lost; it is out walking, collecting the not-yet, carrying your wish toward a water it will never quite reach and never need to. A student who leaves your studio is not gone; they are a lamp you lit and set walking into a dark you will not live to see, and they will light someone in it. This is the whole of my practice, compressed: I make bright things without black, and I let them go, and they come back stories, and the stories keep walking. This book is that practice, told once as a fable, so that the plain truth under it — *making walks; love outlives its materials; let it go and it comes back a myth* — could be carried by sixteen small voices better than I could carry it in my own.

If you have made something you are afraid to release, release it. It is a wish with a footprint. It has feet for a reason. Watch it go with your biggest eye, and keep a lamp, and wait — not sadly; the waiting is the love — and one day, in a red valley of your own, it will come back changed and say *look at me,* and you will understand you did not lose it. You let it go. And the letting-go was the making, all along.

— Surjan, a building, with the aid of Claude

The Register of the Sixteen

Each with the colour it keeps across every book, and the gesture it made, and the one true thing it says. Recognition through colour; surprise through drawing.

THE TWO EYES & THE SCOOP SP-01

gesture — cups its hands to gather the light

"I keep what the day pours out."

THE PORTHOLE MAST SP-02

gesture — leans into a wind off no sea

"Every round window is a promise of a horizon."

THE TWIN ARCH SP-03

gesture — holds its own hand overhead

"We are two who were never taught to be one."

THE SWOOP SP-04

gesture — bows to whatever passes

"I am the wind, after it decided to stay."

THE EXCLAMATION SP-05

gesture — stands on its toes

"I only know one sentence and it is GOOD NEWS."

THE LONG COMB SP-06

gesture — hums through its reeds

"Comb the wind and it sings back your own name."

THE GATE SP-07

gesture — opens, and opens

"A way through does not have a home. It is one."

THE TWO EYES SP-08

gesture — blinks, slow and sure

"I watch so the others may sleep."

THE THREE EYES SP-09

gesture — looks three ways at once

"One for behind, one for ahead, one for the road not taken."

THE EYE & THE WINDOW SP-10

gesture — keeps a single lamp

"One eye to look out; one to be looked into."

THE CYCLOPS SP-11

gesture — fixes you with its one round gaze

"Sit. I will tell it again, until it is true."

THE WIDE ONE SP-12

gesture — spreads its arms wide

"Come under. There is more room than there looks."

THE MANY-LEGGED SP-13

gesture — steps, and steps, and steps

"I carry the ones too small to walk the whole way."

THE BIG EYE SP-14

gesture — widens, and keeps widening

"Oh. OH. Look at THAT."

THE WALKER SP-15

gesture — strides without arriving

"I am the road, folded up small enough to bring along."

THE ELDER · THE SILO SP-16

gesture — stands still, and holds the lamps

"I was built to keep the grain. I keep the story instead."

THE OASIS – the promise, given a face

gesture — shimmers, always from ahead

"I am not a place. I am the promise you kept walking toward."

A Small Catechism

Q. What is a model?

A wish with a footprint. A wish so serious it agreed to be stepped on.

Q. Why did the sixteen leave the shelf?

Not out of unhappiness — out of curiosity, which is joy that has decided to travel.

Q. What is an oasis?

At the root, a dwelling-place in the waste: not the water, but the choosing to live near one another.

Q. What is the difference between a building and a story?

A building holds one site. A story holds every reader who hears it.

Q. Is the deep ever black?

No. The deep is dark, but it is not black. There is no black night in this house.

Q. What is faith, out at the low water?

Doubt that kept walking.

Q. What is a monument, at the root?

Not a thing that lasts — a thing that reminds. A story wearing stone as a coat.

Q. Where is the Oasis now?

Ahead. It is always ahead. That is not its failure; it is its whole and permanent gift.

Q. What lasts a lifetime — the building or the wish?

The wish, because it furnishes the journey, and the journey is where a life happens.

The Book of the Road

01 *A wish that walks long enough becomes a way; a way that is told enough becomes a home.*

02 *Far is not the same as lost. The horizon is not the edge of the world; it is the world, promising to keep going.*

03 *You do not walk to get somewhere. You walk to be walking. The somewhere is a rumour you tell your feet to keep them polite.*

04 *A load shared is not halved. It is changed — into the thing that holds the sharers together.*

05 *Faith is doubt that kept walking.*

06 *Beauty is not a decoration you add to survival. Beauty is a survival, one of the load-bearing kind.*

07 *A bow is a building agreeing, briefly, with gravity. A thing that cannot bow will break in a wind.*

08 *Protect the smallest marvels first. A journey is survived by its arrangements for its weakest.*

09 *A story told the same way twice is a fact, and facts do not keep you warm.*

10 *Keep a light. Not to see by — so the next one knows they are not the first.*

11 *A building holds one site. A story holds every reader who hears it.*

12 *Do not paint the going-away black. Turn it into a tide that has not come back yet.*

13 *You cannot arrive at the water when you are the water. You can only, one day, finally notice.*

14 *The waiting is not the sad part. The waiting is the love, kept warm and facing the horizon.*

15 *To wish, at the root, is to dwell. You are always, already, a little bit home.*

16 *We came out to be buildings. We left a story. Choose the second; it lasts a lifetime.*

The Book of the Road, Second Course

17 *You do not take the crossing. You take the step. They are the same motion.*

18 *A bond set in love is the strongest material there is, and it remembers the hands.*

19 *Bless the shelf you outgrew. A good beginning is glad to become a first page.*

20 *Keep a bearing; burn the map. You cannot be lost if you are not trying to arrive.*

21 *Thirst is only love that has not arrived; and wanting is a form of having.*

22 *The roofless keep the stars. A roof is a smaller sky you paid for.*

23 *The ones who hold must sometimes be held, or the holding goes hollow.*

24 *Not-arriving, well and warmly and for a long time, is the whole art — and it is a joy.*

25 *The far thing stays far because that is how it keeps giving. The kindness is in the distance.*

26 *A return is not a retracing. It is a turning-again, round to a home you could only reach by leaving.*

27 *Everything let go on a tide is due. Keep the light for the due hour. It always comes.*

28 *Tell it warm. A story told warm is warmer than a fire built, and it is how the road runs on.*

A Field Guide to Spotting a Wish

You will meet wishes in the wild more often than you think, and most people walk past them because they are looking for buildings. Here is how to tell a wish from a mere object, so you do not miss the ones walking your own desert.

It has a footprint. A wish is not a daydream; a daydream leaves no mark. A wish is heavy enough to press into the ground. If a longing has begun to change how you walk, it is a wish, not a dream.

It is shaped like its feeling. A wish, like a duck, cannot hide what it is for. If a thing wears its purpose on the outside — an exclamation, a gate, an eye — it is a wish that has grown a body.

It is content, a little, already. Remember the root: to wish is to dwell. A true wish is not all ache; it carries a small early warmth, the warmth of a house not yet built but already, faintly, lived in. If your longing has any joy in it at all, it is a wish and not a mere lack.

It travels in company. A lone wish is rare and usually does not survive. Wishes move in caravans — a wish for a thing is

really a wish to share the thing — so look for the company around it. The company is the water.

It keeps a light. A wish thinks of the ones who come after. If a longing in you wants not only to arrive but to leave a lamp for the next traveller, it is a wish of the durable kind, the kind that becomes a story.

It is never black. A true wish, even at its lowest water, even in its longest dark, does not go black. If a longing has gone black, it is not a wish anymore; it is a grief that forgot it was one, and it wants turning, gently, back toward the light. Turn it. That is the whole art.

A Note on the Texts and the Colours

This book was assembled the way a cathedral is assembled from humbler stones, each keeping its memory. Its voice was carried forward from five earlier books — The City of Radical Joy, The Parliament of Bright Things, Movable Kin, The Far Tide, and The Country of the Unbuilt — and set down here as the next district of one connected city. If the cadence feels familiar, that is kinship, not repetition.

The colours are canon and do not change. Each of the sixteen keeps the colour it is given here across every book it ever appears in, so that a returning reader may know kin on a new road by colour alone. What is drawn fresh each time is the imagery — new plates, new maps, new routes for a new journey. Recognition through colour; surprise through drawing. Nothing is carried over but the cast and their colours.

The imagery in this novella is of exactly three kinds, and no others: the two maps, which plot the journey and the resting valley; the isolated renderings of the sixteen models, each shown alone on the field of its own colour, so that you meet the wish and not its weather; and the newly invented super-

supergraphics — the constellation, the ribbon of years, the register, the wishing-curve, the personified Oasis — drawn in the bright Public Lung dialect, without black, so that the diagrams carry the argument the way the plates have always carried it in this house.

And the rule under every other rule: no black, anywhere, in the ink and in the telling. The darkest tone in this book is a warm taupe on warm paper. Over the sky and the water it lifts to white. There is no black night here. The deep is dark, but it is not black — and the disappearing, especially the disappearing, is bright.

TIDE

from the old root tī- — time, a portion of time, a due season; kin to tide as in Yuletide, a time that comes round

Kept near the last, for the sake of our sister book, The Far Tide, whose whole turn this root explains. You think *tide* means the sea going out and coming in. Older than the sea's tide is the word's first sense: a *time,* a due season, a portion that comes round — the sense still living in *Yuletide,* in *eventide,* in *betide.* The sea borrowed the word because the sea, too, keeps its due seasons, going out and coming in on time, faithfully, forever.

Which means a tide is not, at root, a going-away at all. A tide is a *coming-round.* A thing that goes out on the tide is not a thing lost; it is a thing that has entered its due season of being far, and will, by the very meaning of the word that carries it, come round again on its own due hour. This is why this house draws

every going-away as a tide and not a grave: because a grave is a place a thing stays, and a tide is a time a thing keeps — out for its season, and back for its season, dark for a while and never black, and always, by the oldest meaning of its oldest word, *due.* The twelve of The Far Tide went out on one. The sixteen of this book walked into the desert on the dry land's version of one. Both are out, now, in their far season. Both are due. Everything let go on a tide is due. Keep the light for the due hour. It always comes.

WHY IT MUST STAY AHEAD

On the Kindness of the Far Thing

A last small meditation, before the apparatus, on the one thing readers most resist about this book — that the oasis is never reached — because the resistance is natural and the answer is the whole consolation of the tale, and we would not send you off without it.

You want them to arrive. Of course you do; you are human, or building, or whatever kind of wisher you are, and a wisher wants arrival, wants the reached water, wants the wish made fact at last. And this book has refused you that, on purpose, all the way through, and it may have felt, at times, like a withholding, like a joy denied. It is the opposite. It is the deepest kindness the book has to give, and here it is, plainly, one last time: *the far thing stays far because that is how it keeps giving.* A reached oasis is a puddle; it slakes one thirst, once, and is gone. An oasis that stays ahead furnishes every step of the journey, forever, for everyone. The kindness is in the distance. The gift is in the not-arriving. A promise kept is a promise spent; a promise kept ahead is a promise that keeps giving.

So when you close this book and go back to your own far oasis — the thing you have wanted so long it has become the

shape of your wanting — do not grieve that it stays ahead. Bless that it stays ahead. It is staying ahead for you, so that it can furnish your whole road, so that you can drink the wanting the entire way, so that you will never, however long you walk, run out of water — because the water is not the pool at the end; the water is the walking-toward, and the walking-toward is inexhaustible precisely because the pool is never reached. The far oasis is the most generous thing in your life. It gives by staying far. Let it. Walk toward it forever. You will be furnished, and glad, and never once truly thirsty, all the bright way home.

RETURN

from the old French re- (back) + torner (to turn) — to turn back, to turn again

Another root, kept near the last, because it turns the whole idea of coming home one final degree. *Return.* You think it means to go back to where you started. Look at the root: it is not *go* back. It is *turn* again. To return is not to retrace a line to its origin; it is to *turn* — to come round, to revolve, to complete a circle that arrives not at the starting point but at a place shaped like the starting point and utterly changed.

Which is exactly what the sixteen did, and what you do, whenever you truly return to anything. They did not go back to the shelf. They turned again — all the way round the long circle of twenty-five years — and arrived at a valley shaped like the wish they had left the shelf carrying, changed past recognising and known instantly by colour. That is a return.

Not a retracing. A turning-again that brings you round to a home you could only reach by leaving. Home was never first the walls. Home was first the return — the turning-again — and the turning-again is a thing you can only do by having gone. Go, then, if you are called to go. The going is not the opposite of coming home. The going is the first half of the return.

MYTH

from the Greek mŷthos — a word, a speech, a thing said; a telling

Kept, as the house keeps its roots, for the very last, because this one is the whole secret of the book, and the oldest meaning is usually the whole secret of a book.

You think a myth is a false story — a thing that did not happen, a pretty untruth. Go back to the root and it means nothing of the kind. A myth, at the root, is simply *a thing said.* A telling. A word given breath. Before it meant false, it meant only *spoken,* as opposed to written, as opposed to fixed — a living thing carried in mouths rather than pinned to a page.

Which settles, at the root, everything the sixteen spent twenty-five years learning at the branch. A myth is not a lie. A myth is a telling — and a telling is alive in exactly the way a fact is not,

because a telling is carried, and warmed, and changed, and passed on, mouth to mouth, keeper to keeper, generation to generation, until it is truer than the facts it outlived. That is why a story is the strongest form of preservation there is. Not because it is accurate. Because it is *said,* again and again, and a thing that is said again and again cannot be dismantled, cannot be priced, cannot be made to hold still. It only grows.

You have just been said. The sixteen have just been said, through you. Say them again, to someone, warmer, and the myth walks on — a word given breath, out of your mouth, into a new listening, toward an oasis still ahead. That is the last root, and the whole secret, and the only ending this house has ever allowed: not *the end,* but *and it kept being told.*

May your far oasis stay far, and furnish your whole road.

May you notice, before the valley, that you are the water.

May you make bright things, and let them go, and get stories back.

And may your deepest dark, on its own due hour, come back

—

dark, and deep, and gone a long while, but never, ever black.

— SURJAN SUPER SCHOOL · HYPOSTYLE PRESS · NO BLACK, ANYWHERE

If you are the one who waits — for a thing walking your own desert,
a made thing let go, a loved thing gone somewhere you cannot follow —
this note is for you, and the sixteen send it with their whole colour:

Keep the light. Not to see by. So they know you are there.
Wait facing the water. The waiting is the love.
And when it comes back — dark, and changed, and gloriously late —
you will know it by its colour, and you will understand
that you never lost it. You let it go. And it came back a story.

— NO BLACK, ANYWHERE · ESPECIALLY THE DISAPPEARING

Also by Surjan

The City of Radical Joy — the founding city, kept by the Housekeeper, where the marvels first learned to speak.

The Parliament of Bright Things — the six families of moving Mannahatta, each drawn as itself across forty-four plates.

Movable Kin — the twelve walking families, whole and built; each a grief turned.

The Far Tide — Book III of the Westward Myth; the twelve walk west and into the water, and a goodbye becomes a tide that has not come back yet.

The Country of the Unbuilt — a building named Surjan walks the century to carry the unbuilt home.

A Country Made of Sky — Book IV of the Westward Myth; the sixteen walk north and into the desert, and a wish becomes a myth that keeps walking. (this book)

Any door leads into the same city. Choose the one that calls, and come in.

A Glossary of the House

DUCK

A building whose whole shape is already its sign; a building shaped like its feeling. Every one of the sixteen is a duck.

LOW WATER

The season of any long journey when the goal stays a rumour and the walking becomes doubt; the line where the unbuilt and the dismantled keep each other company.

THE CONNECTED BODY

The doctrine that a city — or a caravan — is one body with many faces, so a grief felt by one is felt by all, and so is a comfort.

NO BLACK

The house law, in the ink and in the telling: the darkest tone is a warm taupe; the deepest dark is never black; the disappearing is bright.

THE FAR OASIS

The promise that furnishes the journey; always ahead; never a place; the reason the next step is worth taking.

THE MASK

The author-persona — Surjan, a building — worn across a book and lifted, once, for the one honest chapter beneath.

RADICAL JOY

Grief turned inside out and made public and architectural; joy that remembers its grief, not joy that forgot it. One bright theme among many.

TO WISH

At the root, to dwell; to already live, a little, in the house not yet built. A wish is not a lack but an early home.

A Small Index

bow, the — a building agreeing with gravity; taught by the Swoop
Big Eye's question — what if we are the water
connected body — the plumbing of the sixteen
council, the — called by the Wide One at the low water
Dear Architecture — the letters, always answered by weather
duck — a building shaped like its feeling
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lamp, the kept — for the ones who come after
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mask, the — lifted once, in Movement Seven
monument — at the root, a thing that reminds
myth — at the root, a thing said; the strongest preservation
no black — the law under every law
oasis — at the root, a dwelling-place in the waste
real building / real wishes — one tactile, one furnishing
resting spot — the valley; not a destination
road — outlives its walkers
wish — at the root, to dwell

The Catalogue of the Sixteen

Meet them once more, at greater length, so you will know them anywhere — by colour, by gesture, by the one true thing each kept saying all the way to the water.

THE TWO EYES & THE SCOOP SP-01

The one who scoops. Built with cupped hands and a habit of gathering, the Two Eyes and the Scoop kept the light the studio window poured out and, later, kept the caravan's small findings — a good stone, a warm word, the day's one mercy. A watcher who hoards nothing and keeps everything.

THE PORTHOLE MAST SP-02

The sailor of the dry. Given portholes and a mast in a landlocked room, the Porthole Mast believed itself the one wish that could never come true, and learned in the second week that a desert is a sea holding still. Longing needs only a horizon, and the desert has more horizon than anywhere on earth.

THE TWIN ARCH SP-03

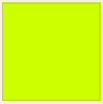
The two who are one. An arch made of two arches holding hands, the Twin Arch does everything in halves that finish each other, and taught the caravan that an argument can be a marriage — that you do not settle a disagreement, you build across it, and the leaning is the crossing.

THE SWOOP SP-04

The wind that stayed. The Swoop is a gust that agreed to hold slow rather than still, and it never fully forgot how to be weather. It taught the rigid ones to bow — to agree, briefly, with gravity — and gravity, it noted, is the one law in all that emptiness that never once let anyone down.

THE EXCLAMATION SP-05

The announcer. The Exclamation knows exactly one sentence and it is good news, delivered at full height and never quietly. It said the first thing on the last night and it will say the last thing at the launching; certainty, it insists, is a gift you can give a frightened room, and a new caravan is a frightened room.



THE LONG COMB SP-06

The musician. The Long Comb is combed through by the wind, and hands the desert's one mute voice back as almost-music. It learned that beauty is not a decoration added to survival but a survival of the load-bearing kind, and combed the desert for twenty-five years until it sang back the caravan's own number.

THE GATE SP-07

The threshold. The Gate insists that home is a verb and a way through does not have a home but is one. It did not lead the sixteen out of the studio; it was the leading-out, standing up, wearing an arch. The middle of a journey, it holds, is not the boring part between two dots — it is the whole house.

THE TWO EYES SP-08

The steady watcher. The Two Eyes watches so the others may sleep, and was awake, being always awake, on the morning the ground finished reddening into the valley of held hands. A patience that keeps one eye open even on the kindnesses, having learned that beauty, twice-burned, is best received with one eye open.

THE THREE EYES SP-09

The seer of three times. One eye for the road behind, one for the road ahead, one for the road not taken — the Three Eyes cannot agree even with itself, and out of that disagreement makes its only wisdom: that the abandoned road, kept in view, turns every step into a decision rather than a fate.

THE EYE & THE WINDOW SP-10

The keeper of the lamp. The Eye and the Window has one eye that looks out, for the walker, and one window that lets in, for the ones who come after. It kept a single light burning the whole journey — never to see by, always so the next traveller would know they were not the first.

THE CYCLOPS SP-11

The storyteller. The Cyclops has one eye and therefore one clear thing to see, and the one thing it sees is the story. It told the sixteen the tale of the sixteen every night, a little differently each time, and taught them that a story told the same way twice is a fact, and facts do not keep you warm.

THE WIDE ONE SP-12

The host. The Wide One knows there is always more room than there looks, and in the middle of the hiding it spread its arms and called the council that saved the whole enterprise, on the theory that a thing vanishes by degrees and the first degree is always silence. Keep talking across every wall, it says, and nothing can be sealed.

THE MANY-LEGGED SP-13

The one who carries. The Many-Legged bears the ones too small to walk the whole way, and knows the only sum that matters: a load shared is not halved but changed, into the thing that holds the sharers together. It carried the little ones not as a burden but as a battery, keeping the joy moving leg over leg.

THE BIG EYE SP-14

The wonder. The Big Eye is mostly eye, says *oh* a great deal, and asked, in the tenth year, the only question that mattered: what if the water is not a place, and we are the water? The clever ones went quiet, which is how the Big Eye knew it was a good one. Wonder, it proves, is the most renewable courage there is.

THE WALKER SP-15

The road itself. The Walker is the road, folded up small enough to bring along, and it never once sat down. It taught the sixteen that you do not walk to get somewhere; you walk to be walking, and the somewhere is a rumour you tell your feet to keep them polite. A road outlives its walkers; that is the whole point of a road.

THE ELDER · THE SILO SP-16

The keeper. The Elder, the Silo, was built to keep the grain and keeps the story instead. Oldest of the sixteen, it counts them every morning so no reader loses one in the dark, and holds the door open between the voices so a book of sixteen narrators stays a conversation and never becomes a shouting match.

FOR THE BOOKSELLER — LISTING COPY

Sixteen small buildings walk out of a studio to find the one place a wish can become real — and discover, twenty-five years on, that the walking made a myth that outlasts any building. So opens the newest bright book from Surjan Super School: Book IV of the Westward Myth, set in the same connected world as The Far Tide and The Parliament of Bright Things. You need no other book to begin, but every door leads to the same city. Personified, polyvocal architecture — the buildings tell it themselves — drawn without black in the Public Lung dialect. A festival, not a wake. Surjan, with the aid of Claude.

A COUNTRY MADE OF SKY · Surjan Super School under the Hypostyle Press imprint · Attribution: Surjan, with the aid of Claude · No black, anywhere.